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BERKELEY**

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Born in 1893, Anthony Berkeley (Anthony Berkeley Cox) was a British crime writer and a leading member of the genre's Golden Age. Educated at Sherborne School and University College London, Berkeley served in the British army during WWI before becoming a journalist. His first novel, *The Layton Court Murders*, was published anonymously in 1925. It introduced Roger Sheringham, the amateur detective who features in many of the author's novels including the classic *Poisoned Chocolates Case*. In 1930, Berkeley founded the legendary Detection Club in London along with Agatha Christie, Freeman Wills Crofts and other established mystery writers. It was in 1938, under the pseudonym Francis Iles (which Berkeley also used for novels) that he took up work as a book reviewer for *John O'London's Weekly* and *The Daily Telegraph*. He later wrote for *The Sunday Times* in the mid 1940s, and then for *The Guardian* from the mid 1950s until 1970. A key figure in the development of crime fiction, he died in 1971.

# **THE SECOND SHOT**

**ANTHONY BERKELEY**

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## **THE SECOND SHOT**

This is a fictional work and all characters are drawn from the author's imagination. Any resemblances or similarities to people either living or dead are entirely coincidental.



## to a. d. peters

My dear Peters:

What is the future of the detective story? That is a question which should interest you as much as me. To quote the only reviewer of detective fiction whom we who write it can take seriously (because the only one who takes us seriously): 'As to technique, it appears that there are two directions in which the intelligent novelist is at present trying to develop...: he may make experiments with the telling of his plot, tell it backwards, or sideways, or in bits; or he may try to develop character and atmosphere.' This, I think, is exactly the case; and having, as a convinced experimentalist, already tried the former alternative,<sup>1</sup> I am here making my attempt at the latter.

In my own opinion it is towards this latter that the best of the new detective-writing energies are being directed. I personally am convinced that the days of the old crime puzzle pure and simple, relying entirely upon plot and without any added attractions of character, style, or even humour, are, if not numbered, at any rate in the hands of the auditors; and that the detective story is already in process of developing into the novel with a detective or a crime interest, holding its reader less by mathematical than by psychological ties. The puzzle element will no doubt remain, but it will become a puzzle of character rather than a puzzle of time, place, motive, and opportunity. The question will be, not, '*Who* killed the old man in the bathroom?' but, 'What on earth induced X, of all people, to kill the old man in the bathroom?' I do not mean that the

reader need know until after a considerable part of the story has been told that it was X at all (the interest of pure detection will always hold its own); but books will no longer end with the usual bald exposition of the detective in the last chapter. The detective's solution will only be the prelude to a change of interest; we shall want to know exactly what remarkable combination of circumstances did bring X, of all people, to the decision that nothing short of murder would meet the case. In a word, the detective story must become more sophisticated. There is a complication of emotion, drama, psychology, and adventure behind the most ordinary murder in real life, the possibilities of which for fictional purposes the conventional detective story misses completely.

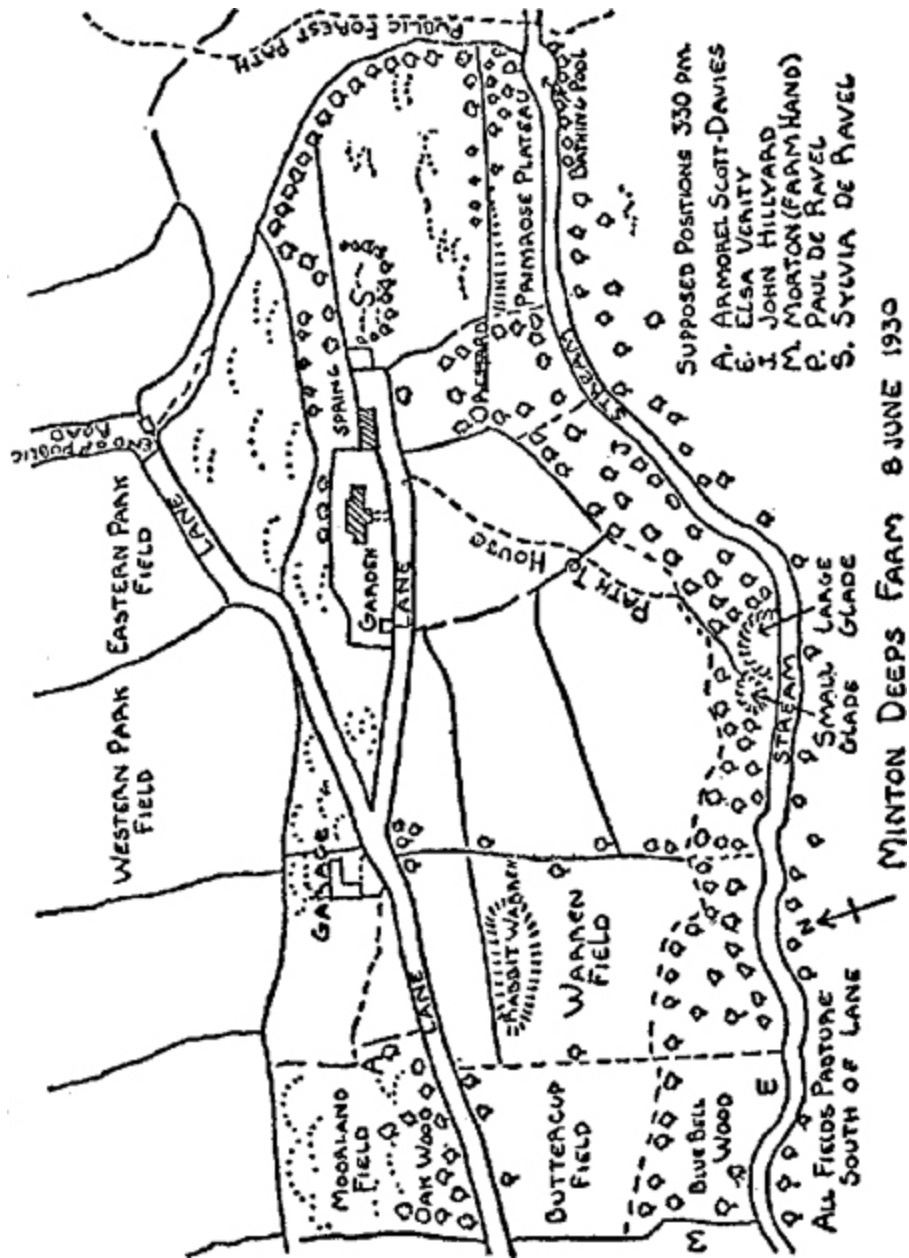
That by clever technique the reader's interest can be retained after the murderer's identity has been disclosed is proved by *The Singing Bone* collection of stories by Dr Austin Freeman, in which we see first of all the criminal actually at work and follow the detective's subsequent activities with that knowledge before us; and by Mr A E W Mason's *At the Villa Rose*, in which Celia's inside story of the murder, after its solution by Hanaud and the arrest of Wethermill, occupies no less than a third of the book and yet holds us just as firmly as did the actual process of detection.

Strictly speaking perhaps the book now before you is not a detective story at all. That is, it is the story of a murder rather than the story of the detection of a murder. But so long as the murderer's identity is not disclosed (at least, not purposely), this only means that the reader-detective has to use his own wits a little more and does not get all his thinking done for him.

Anyhow, detective story or not, I offer the book to you by way of some small acknowledgement of all you have done for me.

AB

<sup>1</sup> Circularly, in *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*.



## prologue

From the *Daily Courier*, Thursday June 9th, 1930.

FATAL ACCIDENT AT HOUSE PARTY

Well Known London Clubman Killed

TRAGIC END TO JOKE

Detective Drama

FROM OUR OWN REPRESENTATIVE

*Minton Vale,  
Wednesday.*

A shocking accident occurred today at Minton Deeps Farm, the residence of Mr John Hillyard, the well known detective-story writer. Mr Hillyard, who is better known in this district as a scientific and up-to-date farmer than as the writer of the series of detective stories centring round Inspector Goodge which enjoys such a wide popularity, was, with Mrs Hillyard, entertaining a small house party at his farm, which included Mr Eric Scott-Davies, a popular and well known man-about-town. I understand that, following a good-natured 'chipping' of their host regarding the powers of detective-story writers if put to the stern test of reality, the younger members of the party, including Mr Scott-Davies, had arranged to enact a little drama in which one of their number should pretend to have been murdered by another, and Mr Hillyard was then to follow up the clues that had been laid and discover the pseudo-criminal.

The drama was actually played this afternoon, and Mr Scott-Davies, who was to represent the victim, pretended in realistic manner to have been shot by another of the guests, a Mr Cyril Pinkerton. Several fellow authors had been invited by Mr Hillyard to co-operate with him in unmasking the villain, including Mr Morton Harrogate Bradley, 'A W Henry' (Professor Henry Johnson), and the well known novelist, Miss Helen Asche, and these had duly investigated the circumstances of the supposed 'murder', during which there was considerable amusement at the antics of the 'corpse'. After the investigation was over, the whole party returned to the farm, where Mrs Hillyard was awaiting them, for tea. On their way, it is alleged, two shots were heard, at an interval of about five minutes.

As Mr Scott-Davies did not arrive, two of the party went down to the woods to look for him. They found him lying on his face a short distance away from the glade which had been the scene of the pretended 'murder'. A doctor was summoned as rapidly as possible, but Minton Deeps Farm is a considerable distance from the nearest town, which is Budeford, and some time necessarily elapsed before Dr Samson could arrive. When he did so, he pronounced at once that life had been extinct for about three quarters of an hour. This corresponds roughly with the time that had elapsed since the two shots were heard.

The police had already been notified by Mr Hillyard, and arrived as Dr Samson was concluding his preliminary examination. A careful survey was made of the circumstances, and Dr Samson, proceeding to a more detailed examination, was able to state his opinion that a single bullet had entered Mr Scott-Davies' back and penetrated directly to his heart. Death must have been practically instantaneous. A .22 rifle was lying on the ground just behind Mr Scott-Davies and slightly to his left, and it is assumed that he must have been dragging it along the

ground behind him by the muzzle when the trigger caught in a twig or some similar obstruction, with tragic results. The fact that two shots were heard in the wood instead of only the fatal one lends support to the idea that Mr Scott-Davies was carrying a loaded rifle. He has a great reputation as a sportsman, and I understand that he would nearly always carry a gun of some sort when strolling in the country, on the off-chance of seeing a rabbit or some other suitable target.

The tragedy has, it is needless to say, cast a deep cloud of sorrow not only over the party at Minton Deeps Farm, but over London society in general, where the late Mr Scott-Davies was a well known and popular figure.

I had a short conversation with Mr Cyril Pinkerton, who had enacted the part of 'murderer' in the little comedy that preceded the tragedy. 'It is naturally a great shock to all of us,' Mr Pinkerton said to me. 'What we cannot understand is how Mr Scott-Davies can have been guilty of such terrible carelessness. I am no "sportsman" myself (unfortunately the slight astigmatism from which I suffer renders it impossible), but even I know that the first rule when handling loaded firearms is not to drag them along the ground by the muzzle. One can only suppose that in Mr Scott-Davies' case familiarity bred contempt.

'For one dreadful moment after I heard of Mr Scott-Davies' death the thought flashed through my mind that the rifle (a .22 too, by the way) with which I had been supposed to shoot him in our little play must by some unthinkable carelessness have become loaded with ball instead of blank ammunition. It was a positive relief to me to remember how Mr Scott-Davies had amused us all during the subsequent part of the play by his humorous imitation of a 'dead' man. His death will leave a gap which will not be easily filled.'

I understand that the police are still proceeding with their investigations at Minton Deeps Farm.

*From a report by Superintendent Hancock, of the Devonshire County Police, dated June 10th, 1930:*

...so that the theory of accident, though still possible, seems to me almost disposed of.

With reference to the two shots. I questioned Mr John Hillyard further regarding the shot which, as I stated the day before yesterday, he admits to firing himself in order to complicate the play-acting. He is still unable to state whether he fired before or after the other shot, as he did not hear the latter. I have not been able to get any information on this point from anyone else. I have still not been able to trace who fired the other shot, if it was not due to the deceased's carelessness (*see above*). I am satisfied that it came from the gun that was lying near the deceased.

With reference to relations between inmates of Minton Deeps Farm and the deceased. I am satisfied that the play-acting was not all playacting. Mr John Hillyard still states that the story they were to act (*see my report dated 9.6.1930*) was quite imaginary, but I have some reason to believe that a good deal of it is not far from the real truth. I shall be glad to receive the report from London in answer to my request for news of any gossip connecting the deceased with Mrs Sylvia de Ravel, as soon as it comes to hand. I should like to state here that I have not found the inmates of Minton Deeps Farm (with the exception of the servants and outside staff) very helpful. I do not wish to imply that they have hindered or obstructed me in any way, but it is my impression that they are concealing something, either in league or separately.

With reference to Cyril Pinkerton. I have questioned him again today more closely as to his movements in the wood after the first shot was heard, and I do not consider his answers satisfactory. He is unable to account, in my opinion, for spending so much time there. His answers when pressed

as to the direction from which the sound of the second shot seemed to come (while he was alone in the wood; see my report of the 8th) were today confused and uncertain. I have obtained more information regarding the quarrel between himself and the deceased, which I am embodying in a separate memorandum attached to this report. Having regard to Mr Pinkerton's character and the high opinion he appears to have of his own importance, it is my belief that such an incident as the throwing of Mr Pinkerton into the swimming pool (see my report under yesterday's date) would alone provide ample motive for Mr Pinkerton's going to extreme measures; added to which there is the rivalry between them concerning Miss Elsa Verity. I should be glad to hear from you whether you agree with my conclusions on this point and whether you have any suggestions to make. In my opinion there is not yet sufficient evidence to justify detaining Mr Pinkerton for inquiries, but I am hopeful of obtaining more shortly.

In the meantime I have a peculiar circumstance to report. Detective Sergeant Berry, whom I had detailed to keep Mr Pinkerton under observation, followed him last evening shortly after 11 p.m., when it had just become dark, to a piece of land on a steep part of the hillside known as 'the moorland field', about a quarter of a mile southeast of the house buildings. This field is about two acres in extent and is covered with bracken, gorse, and brambles, and is consequently useless for grazing purposes and is little used. Detective Sergeant Berry, unobserved by Mr Pinkerton, saw the latter bury something in circumstances of secrecy among the roots of a gorse bush. Detective Sergeant Berry waited until Mr Pinkerton had returned to the house and then retrieved the object. It was a flat metal waterproof box containing several sheets of closely written paper. Detective Sergeant Berry reported the discovery to me, and I sent a staff constable with a knowledge of shorthand at 4.30a.m.



this morning to take a shorthand transcript of the manuscript. I have had two copies typewritten and attach one to this report. The manuscript is in the nature of an account of the matters preceding the death of the deceased, and I have already found it of great assistance to me in clearing up of several points which had been obscure. I shall of course be careful to check all statements of fact and have already done so with many and found them hitherto quite correct. It will be seen that Mr Pinkerton states his intention of proceeding with this writing, and I shall therefore continue to have transcripts taken of any additions he may make from day to day and attach them to my reports. I have reprimanded Detective Sergeant Berry for carelessness in allowing Mr Pinkerton to observe that his effects had been searched.

I have refused permission for any of the persons at present staying at Minton Deeps Farm to leave the neighbourhood for the time being, and trust you will find this in order.

I have only one other circumstance to report. Mr Pinkerton was observed to be at the telephone for some time this morning, and Detective Sergeant Berry was able to hear that he was endeavouring to ascertain the address of R Sheringham, Esq. This was obtained for him by the post office in Budeford from a copy of the London Telephone Directory, and Mr Pinkerton at once telephoned the following telegram:

*Sheringham, Albany, London. Please come if possible  
Minton Deeps Farm, Minton, Budeford, Devon, in  
connection with Scott-Davies affair. Am in most  
awkward position. Was at Fernhurst with you.*

CYRIL PINKERTON.

It is therefore clear that Mr Pinkerton has an idea of my suspicions, but this cannot be helped; and if he is the guilty party it is only natural.

A telegram was subsequently telephoned from Budeford to Mr Pinkerton signed 'Sheringham' that the sender was arriving this evening. There can be no doubt that this is Mr Roger Sheringham, who has been attached for duty once or twice to Scotland Yard. I shall see him tomorrow and ask if that is the case now, and if not I should be glad to have your instructions as to how you wish me to treat Mr Sheringham and whether I am to regard him as likely to assist our inquiries or the reverse.

I am still confident that it will not be necessary for us to ask help from Scotland Yard in this matter, and hope to have it cleared up within a few days.

I have the honour to be,

Your obedient servant,

JAMES HANCOCK.  
Superintendent.

Enclosure: 1 memorandum.

1 transcript of manuscript by Cyril Pinkerton,  
Esq.

**MR PINKERTON'S  
MANUSCRIPT**

## chapter one

I have often thought of writing a detective story.

The authors of these works all seem to me to make the same mistake: their stories are invariably told from the angle of the detached onlooker. This may make for a good puzzle, but it certainly does not make for human interest. And in the art of fiction, even in so low a form of it as the detective story, human interest should to my mind be a *sine qua non*. It is here, I think, that the writers of detective stories overlook a great opportunity: for however absorbing the detached onlooker's interest may be (whether in fiction or in real life) in the detection of a crime, there is one person to whom that interest must be far more absorbing, not to say vital, and that person is the criminal himself.

Another error I have noticed on the part of the detective-story authors is that they begin their narratives in almost all cases with the discovery of the crime itself. This is palpably absurd. It is the preceding circumstances which make the crime. Why not, instead of allowing these circumstances to be laboriously brought out in the body of the story, show the puppets in action before the criminal offence instead of merely after it? That, I submit, is not only more fair to the reader (which I understand is one of the main points by which these authors are judged), but is surely more likely to make a better novel.

I had privately determined, then, that one day I would write such a model detective story from the point of view of the criminal himself, showing his hopes and terrors as the process of detection progresses, the painful anxiety with

which he would watch to see whether this or that fact, known only to himself, would be laid bare by the trackers on his trail, and his desperate attempts to extricate himself from the closing trap by laying new, false, and exonerating evidence. In the right hands such a book might be made a really outstanding piece of work; and I saw no reason why the hands should not be mine.

Such was the academic theory I had formed at leisure. And now I have an opportunity of carrying it out in grim practice. For at the very moment while I am penning these words I am actually (it would be affectation to disguise the fact, even from myself) suspected of having murdered a fellow creature. I!

Somebody (probably Voltaire, who seems to have said most of these things) once said that the last thing a man should lose is his head. I am determined to keep mine.

In view of what I have just written this may strike the reader (assuming that this manuscript is ever given to the world) as a somewhat grim jest. That, however, is the mood in which I feel myself. For strangely enough I do not seem particularly frightened, although – again it would be affectation to deny it – I am perhaps actually facing death, and that in its most ignominious form. I am evidently braver than I imagined. (The reader will see that even still I am capable of perfectly detached self-analysis.)

One way in which I am determined to indulge this grim humour of mine is in this very manuscript.

I explained above that I had long intended to write just such an imaginary story as I am now living in deadly reality. Well, why should I boggle at it because I am the victim of the narrative instead of its master? The story is here, and I *shall* write it. In cynical detachment I mean to set down, calmly and impartially, the exact circumstances which have led to my present predicament, omitting (with one single

exception, which would bring pain to another) nothing at all, exaggerating nothing, minimizing nothing. In short, I shall endeavour not merely to rise superior to my unfortunate situation but actually to employ it, in the attempt to compile a document which, should it ever be given to the world, might be regarded of real value to literature alike as to life.

I shall not offer to show my manuscript to the police. It is possible that the careful recapitulation of events and reconstruction of the last few days might prove of real value to them in their attempts to discover how Eric Scott-Davies met his death; but I can quite well guess what their attitude would be if I did so. They would look on the action, in their unimaginative way, as an attempt on my part to remove their suspicion from myself; they would realize nothing of the feeling of artistic fitness which almost compels me to pen and paper. No, I shall on the other hand take effective steps to conceal it from them altogether. Not in my bedroom, among my personal belongings. These, I know, have already been ransacked by some clumsy-fingered officer in absurd search for 'evidence', and doubtless they will be again. I have a better plan than that.

One last word. I am not a professional writer. I have never before attempted to tell a story on paper. I am not practised in the arts of subtle hint and delicate shades of meaning. But it is one of my maxims that, except in matters depending on mere physique, what man has done man can do; and I see no reason why I should not be able to perform this particular task as well as any other. Without self-flattery, I do not think the intelligence will be lacking: at least, such small degree of intelligence as is required.

With these few words of introduction, then, so that the reader may understand the particularly *piquant* circumstances in which this 'story' is written, I will, as the professional writers put it, set out the facts.

Candidly, I had been a little surprised when I got Mrs Hillyard's letter asking me for a fortnight down to Minton Deeps. Ethel Hillyard is an old friend of mine – that is to say, I have known her since childhood – but I had always had an idea that her husband did not care for me much. Certainly I did not care much for him. He is an uncouth sort of fellow, and I have always considered Ethel wasted on him. Still, Minton Deeps is Minton Deeps, John Hillyard or no, the most charming farm in the whole of Devonshire; and Minton Deeps in June, for those who have eyes to see, is incomparable. I accepted by return.

If I was surprised at having been asked, it was nothing to my astonishment on learning, at my arrival ten days later, who else had been asked too. Minton Deeps Farm is in a remote part of Devonshire, in the heart of the country, ten miles from the nearest market town, and the Hillyards do not entertain much. But on this occasion they had collected something approaching a regular house party. I had expected to be the only guest; there were actually five others.

They were at tea in the little low-ceilinged sitting room when I arrived, and for some reason saw fit to greet my appearance with a series of long, shrill howls. I smiled, of course, as one does at the ill-mannered jest of a spoilt child in the presence of its mother, but I was annoyed. In a flash my visions disappeared of long, lazy days in the sun on the steep slopes of Minton Valley among the bracken and gorse, with a rug and a book and a case full of cigarettes, and Ethel occasionally perhaps to listen to me if I felt in the mood for talking. These people would be wanting all the time to *do* things, and they would expect me to do them too.

My heart sank as I accepted a cup of tea from my hostess and dropped into a chair, though still with the same smile of civilized politeness on my lips; for I take pride in being able to conceal my feelings at all times from the oafs and the

herd. And here were the oafs and the herd. Eric Scott-Davies was there, a man I particularly disliked, a large, loud-voiced, cocksure fellow, a waster and a chaser after other men's wives, with all the insufferable superiority of Eton and the self-confident assertiveness of Cambridge (my own school was Fernhurst, and my university Oxford). Beside him John Hillyard, with his pale sandy hair and his large, red, rather vacant face, the typical gentleman farmer, redolent of the manure heap, showed up to positive advantage.

Then there were Paul de Ravel and his wife, a couple for whom I had never much cared, though she at any rate was a joy to look on, a tall, slender wand of a woman with flaming auburn hair and slumberous green eyes which she normally kept half closed but which could flash sparks of passionate green fire when anything roused her. She was English and had at one time been a professional actress; now she was a natural one, and her immediate surroundings were her invariable stage. Her husband, little Paul de Ravel, had married her four years ago while she was still on the stage, and was said to be still as madly in love with her as he had been then. It had always been curious to me that he had never seen through her poses and her affectations. Paul de Ravel is French by birth and English by upbringing and education, and though his English had no sign of an accent the French in him decidedly predominated, both in appearance and characteristics. Personally I have never cared for the French. He was half-a-head shorter than his wife, and followed her about like a pet poodle. Sexual attraction is a very odd thing. Whenever I think of Paul de Ravel I thank Heaven that I have escaped it.

The leader of the howls had been Armored Scott-Davies, Eric's cousin and almost sister and a most offensive young woman. It had always seemed to me that she comprised in her person every single thing that the newspapers have to say about the modern girl.



Out of the whole roomful in fact there was, besides Ethel, only one person whom I was really glad to see. This was a young girl whose name, I remembered, was Elsa Verity, a charmingly pretty little thing with soft fair hair and shy blue eyes. I had met her for a short time in London the previous winter, also under Ethel's auspices. She was, indeed, I had gathered, rather a protégée of Ethel's, and I seemed to recall vaguely some story of her being exceedingly rich and an orphan, and something about Ethel's fears of her falling prey to some fortune hunter. I adjusted my pince-nez and smiled at her, and she smiled back with delicious confusion. A more pleasing contrast to the unpleasant Armored, with her cropped black hair and her foolish aping of the masculine in her clothes, it would have been hard to find.

John Hillyard was talking to Sylvia de Ravel about his turkeys, or some equally uninteresting birds, and I am sure the conversation was boring her as much as it would have me in her place. John has always puzzled me a little; he is, in fact, one of the very few people who do, for I must confess that I have not found it necessary to make a study of my fellow creatures in order to see through most of them as plainly as if they had been made of plate glass; the average human being is wearisomely transparent. John, however, must be slightly more opaque. He looks the typical farmer; his heart is in farming, and farming only; he seldom talks anything but farming, or the scientific slaughter of wild creatures; one would imagine he never thought of anything else. Yet, unable like any other typical farmer to make farming pay, he has turned what should have been his profession into a hobby and makes his living – and a very comfortable living, I understand, too – by writing, of all things, detective stories. And Ethel tells me that he enjoys very large sales, particularly in America. Perhaps I had John in mind when I hinted above that my own intelligence would hardly be inadequate for a similar task; for certainly if John

Hillyard can write them successfully, then one would say that anybody can.

Such, then, was the company gathered in Ethel Hillyards's Devonshire sitting room that afternoon; and it was not until I was halfway through my second cup of tea that I realized, with quite a start, what a very strangely assorted company it was. Scandal has never held the faintest interest for me, I am glad to say, so that the secret history of my companions of the moment is always the last thing to enter my mind.

In the case of Eric Scott-Davies, however, scandal is far too inflated to remain secret; and though one hears, in the circles in which he moves, a new and disgraceful story about him almost every day, one such story had been so persistent a little time ago as to force itself into permanent lodgment even in my mind. For the last year Eric's name had been coupled unceasingly with that of Sylvia de Ravel, until it was openly said that the whole world knew of the affair except only De Ravel himself. Nor did it need anybody else's knowledge of De Ravel to inform me that when at last that deluded man did hear of it, something violent would happen. And here Ethel, with sublime tactlessness, had asked the trio to share the same roof for the next fortnight!

No wonder I was unable to repress a slight start. The little panelled sitting room had suddenly taken on for me the aspect of a powder mine, with De Ravel himself as the torch only waiting to be kindled into firing it!

Not a pleasant prospect. And that poor child Elsa there, to have her innocent eyes opened to the sordidness of the world. It really was most reprehensible of Ethel, and I determined to tell her so on the first opportunity. Meantime I endeavoured to extract what consolation I could from the situation by hoping that the explosion, when it occurred, would blow Armored away as well as her cousin. How pleasant if it did, and left myself and Elsa as the only remnant of the party.

My opportunity with Ethel came sooner than I expected, and it was she who made it. Immediately after tea she remarked casually to me that she believed there were still a few bluebells left in the woods down by the stream, and if I liked she would come with me and show me where they were. Naturally bluebells meant less than nothing to any of the others (except perhaps Elsa, whose eyes lighted at the mention of them but who was fortunately too shy to suggest accompanying us), so that no one offered to spoil our tête-à-tête. It was typical of Ethel's admirable methods to have separated us from the others so simply and yet so effectively.

I did not mention the subject in my mind as we strolled down through the fields, whose turf had been cropped into springiness by John's sheep. There is a time and a place for everything, and I did not wish to sadden Ethel with my reproaches until we had exchanged the usual greetings of two old and intimate friends. I was really glad to see Ethel again, and told her so frankly (I always believe in giving pleasure when I conscientiously can), and she was good enough to say that she was pleased to see me too, as indeed I have no doubt that she was; for a woman, Ethel is quite intelligent, and it must be a treat for her, buried away as she is, to come into contact with a sympathetic intellect such as my own, after an uninterrupted course of John, his manure-heap and his detective stories. And yet she seems really genuinely fond of the fellow.

We sat down on a fallen trunk in the bluebell wood and feasted our eyes on the spread of colour in silence. There are few women who can remain silent in the face of the beauties of nature; Ethel is exceptional in that, as in other ways. If I had ever contemplated linking my life with that of a member of the opposite sex, I might have married Ethel although she is a year or two older than myself.

‘I want to talk to you, Cyril,’ she said abruptly, breaking into our silence at last.

‘Exactly,’ I agreed. ‘And I think I know what you wish to say, Ethel. You realize what a blunder you made in inviting —’

‘Nothing of the kind,’ Ethel interrupted, perhaps with unnecessary tartness. ‘You haven’t heard what I want to say yet. It’s about Eric Scott-Davies.’

‘As I surmised,’ I murmured, with a little smile.

I let her tell her story in her own way. And I may say at once (for above all things I pride myself on intellectual honesty) that it was a very different one from what I expected to hear. According to what Ethel had to say, the inclusion of Elsa Verity in a party which already contained Eric Scott-Davies and the De Ravels was not a blunder at all but a piece of very carefully thought-out diplomacy. Indeed it appeared that Ethel was becoming positively Machiavellian in her manoeuvres, and though the situation was serious enough in all conscience I could not altogether repress a smile at the notion of dear Ethel in such an unaccustomed rôle.

Divested of its feminine embroidery and circumlocution, the state of affairs seemed to be briefly this: Eric Scott-Davies, whom both Ethel and myself had long ago agreed to be a cad of the first water, was making a serious onslaught on Elsa Verity – not with design upon her virtue but with the, to me, much more sinister intention of marriage. The poor child, innocent in the ways of the world and dazzled by his superficial good looks and the tremendous self-confidence of the man, already imagined herself half in love with him; without desperate measures the tragedy of marriage would eventuate. Eric Scott-Davies’ own object was obvious: he did not care a rap for Elsa herself, her childlike innocence was not to his taste in women by any means; what he

wanted was her money. Having squandered the very respectable fortune into which he had come on the death of his father half a dozen years ago, and with rumours already about that he was contemplating that last resource of all men of family and sensibility, the selling of his family portraits, the fellow was plainly in a desperate position; and when the position was desperate Eric Scott-Davies was not the man to shrink from desperate measures to retrieve it.

So much I gathered from Ethel, and the tears came into her eyes as she spoke of the possibility of Elsa being swept off her feet by such a man, and the inevitable tragic disillusionment afterwards. 'He really has such a terribly compelling way with him, Cyril,' she told me earnestly. 'An inexperienced girl would stand no chance at all with him if he was concentrating on her seriously.'

'Do you mean that he is actually - h'm! - physically attractive to your sex?' I asked delicately, for I very much dislike referring to the sexual relations between man and woman in the presence of one of the latter. I am glad to say that the modern habit of discussing in mixed company matters more related to the garbage heap than to the drawing room has never infected me, at any rate.

'I should think he is,' Ethel replied. 'It isn't flattering my own sex to tell you, but a man of that type, with the veneer covering the brute considerably thinner than usual, appeals directly to every primitive instinct we women have; and we've a good deal more, my dear Cyril, than men of your type ever realize.'

'I see,' I said rather uncomfortably.

'That's exactly the trouble. It's men of Eric's type who *do* sweep us off our feet, not the more civilized kind like you. For instance you, Cyril, could never sweep a woman off her feet if you tried for a thousand years.'

‘I trust I should never try for a single minute,’ I said, somewhat stiffly. If dear Ethel has a fault (and being a woman she can hardly escape that), it is a tendency at times to unnecessary outspokenness.

‘Eric, you see,’ she went on, ‘appeals to instincts in Elsa that the poor child doesn’t know she’s got and would be horrified no doubt to learn that she had; but they respond all right to his sort of treatment. And of course he’s an absolute master in love-making, of the forceful, caveman, won’t-take-modesty-for-an-answer kind, which we unfortunate women find so devastatingly irresistible. A master.’

‘You speak as if you had actual experience,’ I retorted, perhaps unkindly, but I was still feeling a little ruffled.

‘Oh, he’s tried it on me, of course,’ Ethel said with a short laugh. ‘You needn’t look so surprised, Cyril. I’m not positively ugly, and I’m still a year or two on the right side of forty. If it will relieve you, I’ll say I gave him no encouragement at all – in fact I was really very rude to him indeed; but it was an effort. Even while I was saying the nastiest things I could think of, I should just have loved to droop gracefully into his arms.’

What a confession! I passed over it in silence. ‘But do you mean that even after an incident of such unpleasantness he would still accept an invitation to stay under your roof?’

‘Oh, Eric’s got a hide like a rhinoceros. A little thing like that wouldn’t worry him. Besides, no doubt he thinks there’s still hope. After he’s successfully married Elsa’s money, he’ll probably try again.’ I had never heard Ethel so bitter. Usually she is the kindest of creatures.

I took the conversation back to matter of more immediate importance. ‘Of course you’ve warned Miss Verity of the kind of man he is?’

‘Of course I’ve done nothing of the kind,’ Ethel retorted. ‘I’m not a complete and utter fool, Cyril. Even you should

know enough to realize that that would be the surest way of pushing her straight into his arms.'

'But surely she's old enough to use her reason?' I protested.

'She's twenty-one. And a girl of twenty-one is a bigger idiot in matters of that kind, my dear Cyril, than a girl of seventeen; and I can't say more than that. Besides, no woman's ever old enough to use her reason when it's a question of love.' One of the many things that Ethel and I have in common is the profound scorn in which she holds her own sex. Indeed, I have noticed that nearly all nice women despise their sex as a whole. Perhaps that is what makes them nice. 'No,' she went on, 'I've done the only possible thing: I've pretended gently to encourage it. Elsa is quite under the impression that this party has been arranged solely for the benefit of herself and Eric.'

'Whereas in reality - '

'Exactly. As I said just now, there's only one possible hope and that is to shock her out of this infatuation before it get too deep a hold. And hence, my dear Cyril, the De Ravels.'

I swung my pince-nez meditatively on their cord. The bluebells were quite forgotten by now. In front of us the little stream was tumbling over its rocky bed in a way in which I, straight from London, would normally have found most refreshing; as things were, I scarcely heard it.

'Rather playing with fire, isn't it, Ethel?'

'Deliberately. I'm banking entirely on the fire bursting out and consuming Eric with it.'

'And if it doesn't?'

'Then we must take still sterner measures,' Ethel replied with positive grimness. 'I tell you, Cyril, I'd stick at nothing to save Elsa from that man, although I've no direct responsibility for her, only a moral one. She's the daughter

of the greatest friend I ever had (you never knew her, she was at school with me); both her parents are dead, and she has no near relatives; legally, the child's now her own mistress; I've simply installed myself *in loco parentis*. I may have usurped the position, but even if I wasn't so fond of Elsa herself I should feel it my duty to her mother to hang onto it like death. And I don't mind telling you in confidence, Cyril, that I'd rather strangle Eric with my own hands if I could than see him trap Elsa into a sordid marriage.' Prophetic words, which afterwards I had only too good cause to remember.

'Exactly; precisely,' I soothed, for Ethel had been getting uncomfortably dramatic, and I detest the introduction of drama into any situation with which I am concerned. 'So Mrs de Ravel, smitten with jealousy of Eric's attentions to Miss Verity, is to draw back the sheep into her own fold again so effectually that Miss Verity's eyes will be opened and she will be able to throw off these beginnings of infatuation?'

'Something like that,' Ethel agreed, more calmly. 'As you can imagine if you know anything about her at all, Sylvia de Ravel isn't the sort of woman ever to let anything go, human or otherwise, of which she's once established possession. In my opinion Eric made a mistake there. Sylvia isn't a person who can be picked up, toyed with for a time, and then dropped, according to Eric's usual charming ways. He caught her, and she was probably difficult to catch; but he caught a Tartar when he did so. Well, now he's going to pay with Elsa for his mistake.'

'And De Ravel? I understand he's the only person who still remains ignorant of that affair. Supposing he gets wind of it?'

Ethel looked at me squarely. 'Cyril, I don't care if he does. And I don't care what happens afterwards, either. All I care about is getting Elsa away from Eric.' It has been well said



that women are the unscrupulous sex. In this matter I judged that Ethel had absolutely no scruples at all.

‘I see. And Miss Scott-Davies? What part is she to play in this Machiavellian scheme?’

‘Armored? Oh, I just asked her to balance the numbers. Though I thought it would do no harm to show Elsa what sort of a family she’d be marrying into. Besides, there’s no love lost between Armored and Eric, you know.’

‘Really? I understood they were brought up together, since Armored’s parents died when she was a small child. I thought they looked on each other as brother and sister.’

‘Exactly,’ said Ethel, with unusual cynicism. ‘Anyhow, you can take it from me that there isn’t any love lost between them. It’s a matter of money, I think,’ she added indifferently.

‘Armored’s parents hadn’t any, and though Mr Scott-Davies practically adopted her he didn’t mention her in his will, with the vague idea that Eric would provide. I believe Armored’s feeling is that Eric doesn’t provide enough.’

‘So you merely asked her to make the numbers even. In other words, presumably, to balance me. Am I to assume that I have any part in the plot, then, besides that of your advisor?’

‘Yes, Cyril, you are,’ Ethel smiled. ‘You’re cast for the part of second walking gentleman.’

‘At Minton Deeps I usually prefer to be a lying gentleman,’ I replied humorously, for I usually try to season even the most serious conversation with such small quips. ‘When I think of the sun on your bracken...Still, on this occasion perhaps I’ll forego my rug and laziness. So what do you require of your second walking gentleman?’

‘I want you to do your best to distract Elsa’s attention from Eric,’ Ethel replied more earnestly. ‘Show a preference

for her company, get her to go out for walks with you, take her out in your car, show her little attentions; she'll appreciate them from a man so much older than herself.'

'Come, Ethel,' I had to protest. 'Only sixteen years older, when all's said; and just as young, perhaps, in spirit.'

'Anyhow, she'll appreciate them. In fact, Cyril,' Ethel added with another smile, 'while my chief plot is simmering up to boiling-point, you've got to fill up the time in cutting Eric out of Elsa's affections. After all, you shouldn't find it so difficult. There's no doubt which is the better man of the two, if only the poor girl's eyes can be made to see it.'

'You mean,' I said dubiously, 'that I'm to encourage Miss Verity to entertain expectations of affection from me and then, as soon as Scott-Davies has been removed from her horizon, disappoint her?'

'Oh,' said Ethel carelessly, 'till Eric really has been removed from it, we can leave the horizon to look after itself. In the meantime we've got to save the child from herself; and I appeal to you, Cyril, not only as one of my oldest and dearest friends, but as one of the few men I can rely on with enough understanding and sympathy to rescue Elsa from as horrible a danger as ever threatened an unsuspecting girl.'

'You make me feel just like a knight-errant, Ethel,' I said lightly, for in her earnestness she was again showing signs of becoming distressingly dramatic.

My little jest had the effect of checking her symptoms. 'Well, you'll be doing a better job of work than any of those old things ever did,' she laughed.

'A Paladin in Pince-nez,' I said gaily. 'Very well, Ethel, you may count on me to help you to the full extent of my powers of deceiving innocent girlhood.' I maintained my light tone while I gave my promise, for to tell the truth I was feeling more than a little touched both by the peril in which Miss

Verity stood and the fidelity of Ethel in her resolute attempts to avert it; and I feared that she might divine it.

## **chapter two**

During the next few days matters proceeded more or less as might have been expected, while this incongruously assorted party shook down together. That is to say Eric and Armorel were continually arranging new forms of sport, aided by John Hillyard, and trying to induce the rest of us to take part in them. De Ravel played a good deal of tennis with them, but only when his wife was free to sit by the court and watch (Mrs de Ravel disliked sport in all its forms, and took no part in the Scott-Davies' activities), and so did Miss Verity, though she was naturally not such a good player as the others. I joined in one or two sets at first, just for the appearance of the thing, but I am an indifferent performer at the best of times; and when I discovered that Scott-Davies was trying to make a butt of me I firmly refused to touch a racket again. A man owes it to himself to draw the line somewhere.

Minton Deeps is within a few miles of the coast, and in spite of the fact that it has a swimming pool in the stream at the bottom of the valley, bathing parties to the sea were organized. Personally I did not go on them. I am not a strong swimmer, and sea bathing has never appealed to me. Nor do I play golf. Here I had thought that Miss Verity and I had a common bond, for she did not play either, whereas Eric was what they call a plus-man. With diabolical ingenuity, however, Eric persuaded Miss Verity to let him teach her the game, and on this plea succeeded in carrying her off on two occasions to the neighbouring links for the whole day in spite of all my attempts to prevent it. Nevertheless on the whole I was not ill-pleased with the results of these days.

Several times Miss Verity came out for walks with me (I rather suspected that Ethel had a hand in this), and once I was able to carry her off right under Eric's nose. His remarks as I lifted my hat in mocking farewell were a pattern of what a gentleman's should not be.

Such was our life on the surface during those days. Beneath that surface who can say what cross-currents were gradually gaining strength to sweep the party on to its final catastrophe? Inevitably most of the intrigue was hidden from an onlooker such as myself, but nobody but her husband could have failed to notice the immense efforts Mrs de Ravel was making to deal with her erring swain. She treated poor little bewildered Elsa Verity with a contemptuous and lazy rudeness which at times quite took my breath away. If Eric had had a spark of affection for the girl he would have hotly resented it aloud and condemned the consequences; as it was he merely grinned. I began to dislike the fellow more and more, if that were possible. What passed between the two of them in private no else can say; but one thing was quite certain: Eric's pursuit of Miss Verity showed no diminution. It seemed as if Ethel's ingenious plan was to fail after all. I was more sorry than I can say, for our walks together, and the trustful, pleased way in which she received my attentions and my conversation were beginning to endear the girl herself to me altogether apart from her money.

It was on the evening of the occasion when I had carried her off from under Eric Scott-Davies' nose that a most unpleasant incident occurred. To my surprise, after dinner Scott-Davies linked his arm through mine in the most familiar way immediately after we had had coffee, which was served that night in the garden in front of the house, and said in his boisterous voice: 'Come for a stroll, Pinkie, old boy. I want you to tell me all about your wicked little

stamp collection, the bits you didn't let on about this afternoon, what?'

This was an allusion to my hobby of philately, a subject on which I had discoursed for a time to Miss Verity during our walk that afternoon and to which she had made a somewhat unfortunate allusion at dinner. Eric had professed to find food for considerable amusement in so ordinary a matter, and though Elsa had been forced in mere politeness to smile at his absurd gibes I could see how she blamed herself for being the innocent cause of them; I had of course ignored them completely, at the same time sending a smile to Miss Verity of private understanding.

I may say here that my name is Pinkerton, Cyril Pinkerton, but Eric Scott-Davies insists, to my annoyance, in addressing and referring to me as Pinkie, even in the presence of complete strangers. He usually goes on to say that he does so out of compliment to my eyes, which he professes (quite untruthfully) to have red rims to them, thus turning the slight astigmatism from which I am unfortunate enough to suffer into a vulgar joke. A most ill-mannered, boorish fellow.

It was useless for me to protest that I had no wish at all to go for a stroll with Eric, for grasping my arm firmly he drew me with him almost by force. I am not a man of large physique, nor have I ever considered it necessary to be so; but in the grasp of a loutish fellow such as Scott-Davies one has the misfortune of being helpless. To have struggled would have been worse than ineffective, it would have been undignified. I submitted, with a scornful little laugh, and allowed him to lead me through the little strip of front garden, down the steps, and along the grassy track which leads across the front of the house down the valley.

As soon as we were out of sight and earshot of the others he released me, remarking at the same time in mocking

tones: 'Thought you'd rather I said it alone than in front of the others, Pinkie.'

'Said what?' I asked, breathing a trifle rapidly perhaps, for though I had scrupulously concealed it I was more than a little annoyed at having been manhandled in this way.

'What I've got to say. And that is, keep off the grass!' He thrust his hands in his pockets and literally towered over me. His big, rather sallow face above his white shirt front hung above me with a most irritating expression of amusement in which there was nevertheless as well more than a hint of menace.

'I don't understand you,' I said impatiently. 'If you've really anything to say, kindly say it in plain English.'

'All right, little man,' he grinned, 'if you want it plain you shall have it plain: the next time you go for a walk with Elsa when I happen to want her, I'll chuck you in the swimming pool - and you'll be lucky to get off with that. Got me?'

I admit it was foolish of me to be nettled. One should remember that Eric is a vulgar boor, and that the ordinary standards of civilized intercourse between gentlemen simply do not apply to him. Nevertheless there were so many things about this speech of his that I found offensive - the impertinence to myself, the calm use of Miss Verity's Christian name, the still calmer assumption that he had a claim on her whenever he cared to exercise it, his presumption in daring to threaten me with actual physical violence - that I felt myself go hot with anger.

Even so I kept, I hope, my dignity. 'I think Eric,' I said quietly, 'that you must have had too much to drink.'

He had the insolence to laugh. 'Oh, Lord, you are funny when you're cross, Pinkie. You look just like a white rabbit in -'

I had no wish to hear any more insults. I simply turned on my heel and began to walk back to the house.

But the oaf had not finished. He caught me by the sleeve, and though still grinning the threat was still more obvious in his great round face. 'Don't imagine for a minute I'm not serious, Pinkie. I promise you I am. I've noticed you hanging round Elsa ever since we came, and you've got to stop it.'

'Indeed?' I said coldly, though perhaps it was a mistake to answer the fellow at all. 'And by whose orders, may I ask?'

'Certainly, old chap. Mine. Elsa was asked down here to meet me, not you; and that's just what she's going to do in future.'

'I should prefer to hear that from Miss Verity's lips,' I replied shortly.

'Oh, you could if you wanted to; you've only to ask her. And it's about as near her lips as ever you'll get,' Eric said coarsely. 'Anybody but you would have realized by now how stiff you bore her. Good Lord, Pinkie on the love path! I've always said it'd be a scream. You should hear Elsa imitating you, old boy. Funniest thing I ever heard. Ask her to do it when you're there once.'

I think it is to my credit that, boiling though my blood was at this vulgar and clumsy lie, I yet retained complete control over myself. 'Kindly release my arm, please,' was all I said.

Eric did so. 'All right. You can run along now.'

I did not run. I walked.

'But don't forget what I told you,' the fellow called after me. 'It's a promise.'

I simply took no notice.

Eric followed close behind me, and to preserve the appearances I allowed him to catch me up just before we joined the others in the garden. It was a wonderful June night, warm and scented; and though dusk had already fallen I could make out the pale pink of Elsa Verity's frock where the little group was sitting under a big beech tree.



Eric went straight up to her. 'Coming for a stroll, Elsa?' he asked her casually.

As if the big fellow actually exercised some hypnotic spell over her Miss Verity rose without a word.

I interposed. 'I'm sorry, Eric. I promised Miss Verity to show her the stream by moonlight this evening myself. Can I get you a wrap of any kind, Miss Verity?' It was time that Eric was put in his place once and for all. I am not the sort of man with whom one can take liberties of that sort.

Miss Verity hesitated, and Eric chipped in. 'You've lost the bet this time, Pinkie. I promised to show Elsa the stream by moonlight, too, and what's more she promised to look at it when I showed her.'

It was impossible to stand there brawling in front of the others, and I cut the matter short. 'Perhaps when you're in a fit state to do so, Eric, Miss Verity will allow you to keep your promise. Shall we go now, Miss Verity?' And I offered her my arm.

Still the timid girl hesitated, knowing no doubt that she must offend one of us by her decision and reluctant to do so, and in the end it was Ethel who disposed of what might have developed into an ugly scene.

'Of course,' she said briskly. 'Run along with Mr Pinkerton, Elsa. Eric, come and talk to me for once. I've hardly had a word from you since you came.'

Not even Eric could gainsay that, but it was with a very bad grace that he lumbered off to a chair beside his hostess. A few feet away I caught a green glimpse of feline amusement from the eyes of Mrs de Ravel, so malicious that for a second it positively startled me; it was for all the world like a cat gloating over another cat playing for a moment or two with it's own mouse. If ever I had imagined that Mrs de Ravel had abandoned her lover to her rival, I was very completely disillusioned.

Miss Verity was silent as we walked together through the meadows down to the wooded stream. There was nothing unusual in this, for she was always inclined to silence in my company, being no doubt a little overawed, always eager to listen to whatever I might have to say, but speaking little herself beyond prettily encouraging me with a timid question or two from time to time. On this occasion, however, I felt it only right to reassure her in regard to the scene through which we had just passed, though I was careful to remember Ethel's words and said nothing directly derogatory to Eric Scott-Davies.

'You must forgive me,' I said gently, 'for having carried you off in that high-handed way, Miss Verity.'

'Oh, there - there's nothing to forgive, Mr Pinkerton,' she replied, in charming confusion. It was her way of intimating, of course, her preference for viewing the moonlit beauties of the stream in the company of one who could not only appreciate them but voice his appreciation in fitting terms.

'Eric is a good enough sort in his way,' I continued, with Machiavellian ingenuity actually praising my supposed rival, 'but really he is hardly the kind of man to fit into a romantic scene such as this, ha, ha.'

Miss Verity made no answer, her silence expressing her agreement.

'And besides,' I went on, waxing more and more subtle, 'though no doubt he felt it his duty to offer to accompany you, if such a promise really had been made, I fancy he was not sorry for the excuse to stay behind.'

I could not see Miss Verity's face, as we were already entering the darker shadows of the wood, but I distinctly saw her form make a little start. 'What do you mean?' she asked, in tones almost of sharpness.

I developed my theme. 'Well, the attraction is surely obvious, isn't it?'

‘I – I don’t think I understand,’ she said, her sharpness giving way to a rather pitiful trouble. She reminded me of a small girl who realizes she is going to be smacked, but is not quite sure for what. ‘You don’t mean that – that Mrs Hillyard –’

It distressed me to hurt the child, but it had to be done.

‘Ethel? Oh, good gracious, no. Dear me, don’t you really know, Miss Verity? I wouldn’t have mentioned it but that I thought everyone knew.’

‘Knew what, Mr Pinkerton?’ she cried.

‘Why, about Scott-Davies and Mrs de Ravel,’ I answered simply.

We had reached a clearing at the edge of the stream by now, and in the bright moonlight I could see poor Elsa’s face as she received this blow. She stared at me for a moment, and then turned away. ‘No,’ she murmured in low tones, ‘I didn’t know anything about that, and – and I don’t believe it.’ Childlike trust!

It alarmed me, for it showed what a hold the fellow had already got over this frail and delicate creature. ‘Oh, there may be nothing in it,’ I said carelessly. ‘Only for the last year I can assure you it’s been the topic of a good deal of scandalous conversation. Not that I ever listened to such stuff, but some things become so notorious that one simply can’t help hearing of them. In fact, I’ve heard it said that nowadays if one wanted to find Eric, one should look for Mrs de Ravel.’ This was no less than the truth. I had coined the *bon mot* myself.

It was pathetic to see the poor girl’s shoulders shaking under the burden which I had been compelled to lay upon them. She was taking it very hardly. I was within an ace of considering what practical steps I could take to console her in her disillusionment.

I had indeed actually advanced towards her for this very purpose, when she turned round and to my astonishment I saw she was not weeping at all but laughing. 'Oh, Mr Pinkerton,' she said, 'you are funny.'

'Indeed?' I said coldly, for I was not too taken aback by this *volte-face* to forget myself. 'I am glad to have the honour of amusing you, Miss Verity.'

She laid a small propitiatory hand on my sleeve at that and her face grew more sober, as she realized that she had seriously annoyed me; though in her blue eyes there were still dancing twinkles of amusement. 'I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. But I couldn't help laughing when you said exactly what Eric said you would, almost the exact words.'

I was surprised out of annoyance. 'He said I should say that?'

'Yes; about Mrs de Ravel. Of course he told me about her – the truth, I mean – how she's been chasing him for months and won't give him any peace, and how he won't have anything to do with her. And he told me you'd be sure to tell me about it, and – ' she began to laugh again, and then checked herself – 'and – well, you did, didn't you?'

I spread a handkerchief on a fallen log and sat down. This information had taken me unawares. It showed that Scott-Davies possessed an amount of low cunning for which I had not given him credit. He had cleverly spiked our chief gun in advance, before we could bring it into action at all. Ethel had been right. Very drastic measures would be needed.

I was about to pursue the subject with Miss Verity, pointing out to her Eric's duplicity and where the truth really lay, when a hail from the direction of the house interrupted me. Sound carries far in such a valley on a still night, and I had no difficulty in recognizing the shrill tones of Armored Scott-Davies: 'Elsa! Elsa!'

‘Take no notice,’ I smiled. ‘I want to have a very serious talk with you, Miss Verity, and – ’

The girl could not have heard me, for she replied with an equally shrill and (if the truth must be told) most unladylike howl which I should never have expected from her: ‘Hul-lo-o-o!’

‘Moonlight bathing in the poo-oo-ool! Come o-o-o-on!’

‘Co-o-o-oming!’ answered my companion, and added to me, with a prettily apologetic smile: ‘You don’t mind, Mr Pinkerton, do you? It’s such a lovely idea. And we can always talk at some other time, can’t we?’

‘I will certainly not stand in the way of your innocent amusements,’ I replied graciously; though a certain emphasis which I gave to the penultimate word conveyed a good-tempered hint.

We walked back to the house.

The others were coming out, just as we arrived, in their bathing wraps. ‘Hurry up, Elsa,’ said Armored. ‘Join us down there.’

‘Who’s bathing?’ asked Miss Verity, with more animation than she had shown before.

‘Eric and Paul and John and Pinkie and us,’ Armored replied. The unpleasant young woman used the same offensive designation to refer to myself as did her brother. I cannot imagine why. I had never given her the slightest encouragement to do so.

‘Excuse me,’ I interposed. ‘One at any rate of your list is incorrect. I am not bathing.’

‘Oh, do bathe, Pinkie,’ pretended to implore the grinning Armored, executing an absurd kind of dance round me on the lawn. ‘You’ve got such lovely thin legs. Do come and show them off.’

I pass over the extreme indelicacy of this reference, and the foolish guffaws with which it was received by the other members of the bathing party. I merely turned to Elsa and said: 'I'll wait for you here, Miss Verity, while the others go on.'

Elsa went into the house, and I joined Ethel under the beech. She was alone, for De Ravel as usual had insisted on his wife going down to the pool with the bathing party to watch, and I was able to tell Ethel of the new contretemps. I think she was a little annoyed with me for having broached the subject at all, which was unreasonable of her, since it is obvious that a man can do these things so much better than a woman; but we both agreed that something serious must be done. If Eric was trying to keep Mrs de Ravel off the stage, where he could deal with her by suggestion and lies, it was up to us to bring her on.

'But I am frightened of what may happen if Paul does get to know,' Ethel said nervously.

'You said the other day you didn't care what it was,' I reminded her.

'It's true. I don't,' she said, with a quick little breath. 'So long as Elsa - '

'Hush,' I said quietly. Miss Verity was coming out of the house.

I offered my escort down to the pool, and it was accepted with all her old diffident pleasure. She had evidently quite recovered from the strange discourtesy which had caused her to laugh down by the stream. It is astonishing how a boorish influence can corrupt even a creature of such tender sensibilities as Elsa Verity.

We began to walk down the winding tract through the fields that led to the bathing pool, in the opposite direction from the one which we had taken before.

And here, at the risk of appearing indelicate, I must refer to a curious phenomenon which made itself apparent to me during this walk, and which with my practised habit of self-analysis I was able to examine concurrently with its manifestation.

It will have been gathered by the reader that I have not a very high opinion of the opposite sex, and this applies equally to its physical attributes as to its mental powers. The female form, shaped like a minute-glass for boiling eggs, has never struck me as a beautiful object. A minute-glass holds small aesthetic appeal to my mind, and so does a diabolo reel; so also does the feminine figure, with its misplaced bulges, its artistically incorrect centre of gravity, and its general top-heaviness. Girls in bathing costumes, which to judge from the pages of the popular press exercise a universal appeal, excite in me nothing but pity.

It will be seen, therefore, that if I have a prejudice (which I do not admit), it is rather against the female form than in favour of it. Yet as Miss Verity and I walked together down to the pool and, it being night-time, she forgot the natural modesty of a young girl to the extent of omitting to hold her wrap quite so closely together, so that I was able to catch glimpses from time to time of a white arm or leg, a trim waist, or other feminine peculiarities, unwonted sensations invaded me to such an extent that I found myself able actually to admire those very curves which I normally so despised, and even to see beauty in a nubbly knee. A strange experience. I set it down here, though it really has no bearing on what followed.

I was therefore disappointed to notice, when we arrived at the pool, that Miss Verity's discarding of her wrap was almost simultaneous with her plunge into the pool, in a beautiful dive that caused her slim body to flash in a dim curve against the dark background like the bending of a giant bow - a simile which occurred to me on the spot,

surprising me by its poetical aptness; the intellectual honesty on which I always insist has taught me to recognize such limitations as I have, and hitherto poetry has certainly been one of them. Could it be, I wondered, that under the influence of Miss Verity's pure innocence something was calling from the unknown poetical depths of my own soul to similar inarticulate deeps in hers? A not unbeautiful thought in itself.

What followed was, I regret to say, singularly unpoetical. I am determined to set it down exactly as it occurred, neither exaggerating nor minimizing.

Eric Scott-Davies climbed out of the pool and came towards me. 'Hullo, Pinkie,' he called. 'Aren't you bathing?'

I had been on my way to join the solitary figure of Mrs de Ravel on a seat the other side of the pool, and merely threw back to him over my shoulder a short negative.

'Aren't you though, Pinkie? Aren't you?' exclaimed the grinning ape, and without more ado grasped me in his great wet hands and swung me up above his head (I think I mentioned that I am not a man of large physique; I stand, actually, five foot six and three quarter inches in my socks), and walked towards the edge of the pool. Still I could not believe that the oaf would really proceed to extreme measures.

'Steady on, Eric,' called his cousin from the middle of the pool. 'Don't be a damned fool.' It was the first time I had ever found myself in sympathy with Armored.

That little ass De Ravel, however, simply encouraged him. I have always disliked De Ravel. 'Come on, Eric,' he shouted. 'I'll catch him.'

In spite of my struggles (I was doing my best to kick him sharply with my patent-leather evening shoes) Eric held me easily above his head on the very margin of the pool. 'I



promised our Pinkie a swim just after dinner,' he boomed, 'and I always keep my promises.'

'Eric, stop that!' I heard John Hillyard call peremptorily and come splashing towards us. But it was too late. I felt Eric's arms give way under me and then suddenly shoot up, and I was precipitated through the air. With a terrific splash I reached the water and sank beneath the surface. I am not a swimmer.

Somebody got me up and helped me to the bank (I think it was John) and I rather fancy there was a dead silence as I half scrambled and was half pushed onto dry land. Without a word I began to walk up the hill back to the house. If at that moment I had had a gun, a knife or a bludgeon – I say it frankly! – I would have killed Eric Scott-Davies.

## **chapter three**

‘Pinkie, I’ve got to go down and get some bluebells before lunch for Ethel. Like to come and help me gather them?’

‘Thank you, Armored,’ I smiled. ‘I should have liked to very much, but unfortunately I have another task myself.’

This little rencontre, the morning after Eric Scott-Davies’ monstrous behaviour, was typical. Everybody, with the exception of De Ravel who had now come out in his true colours and definitely ranged himself on the oaf’s side, had been going out of their way to show, by such small but unmistakable indications, their appreciation of the way I had taken the affair. Apparently I had been elected, of all things, a ‘sportsman’. It was ridiculous, but I found myself positively warming towards people for whom I had had hitherto, I must confess, no other feeling than a mild contempt.

Elsa, too, who with all her innocence could hardly have been unaware that it was, so to speak, in her cause that I had suffered, was sweetness itself. It did me good to see the prettily embarrassed way in which she repelled Eric’s victorious advances. Indeed, if I had done anything to avert the doom which hung over her, I was more than content.

When I came downstairs that evening, then, after changing my clothes, beyond apologizing to my hostess for having no second evening suit with me, I made no further reference to the incident, realizing indeed that anything of the sort would be almost more awkward for Ethel and John than for myself. Nor did the others, when they returned from the bathing pool. There was nevertheless, and naturally, a feeling of some restraint. To ease it I engaged John Hillyard

in a discussion upon the modern detective story, putting forward some of the tentative views which I held on that subject.

‘The crimes you writers invent are too artificial, John,’ I said, purposely provocative. ‘Too far-fetched. The great crimes in real life are the simple ones. The classical murderers didn’t seek involved and intricate ways of dealing death. They killed simply.’

John muttered something into his whisky-and-soda to the effect that the great crimes of real life might be fine crimes, but they’d make rotten detective stories.

‘Exactly,’ I agreed instantly. ‘Because all you writers confuse intricacy with interest. You think the one means the other. It doesn’t, by any means. Does it, Armored?’ I added, to bring her into the conversation.

‘I don’t expect so,’ she said, rather doubtfully. The discussion was, no doubt, a little above her head.

‘Yes, but our object is to bewilder the reader,’ said John. ‘Can’t expect us to stick too close to real life, you know.’

‘And do you know why?’ I countered triumphantly. ‘Because you must have a bewildering variety of clues to enable you to detect your own crimes – those of you who really do detect them. That’s why. If you were confronted with a mystery in real life, with no machine-made clues – a mystery such as the ordinary country detective inspector is often called upon to solve – why, you’d be able to make nothing of it at all. Yes, you’re all full of theories, John, but you could never turn one of them to practical account,’ I cried.

Ethel clapped her hands gently in pretended applause, and John, who knew when he was beaten and could find nothing to say, took refuge in a yawn which he hastily pretended to stifle.

I turned to the others, who had been following my words intently – all, that is, except Eric, who had the grace to absent himself, and Elsa Verity, who after shaking her head for some time at his efforts from through the window to induce her to join her out-of-doors, had (I was grieved to see) finally consented; no doubt feeling that the rest of us would be happier without him, even though it meant the sacrificing of herself.

‘Don’t you agree with me?’ I asked De Ravel.

‘Oh, probably,’ he said, with rather more indifference than I cared about. After all, it should have been the duty of all of us to keep the conversational ball rolling.

‘I don’t, at all,’ said his wife, in her deep, lazy tones. ‘I’m sure that if anyone was murdered at Minton Deeps, John would be able to detect the criminal at once.’

It was then that Armored had her fatal inspiration. ‘Well,’ she cried, ‘let’s murder somebody and see.’

I think we all sat up.

‘Really, Armored!’ exclaimed dear Ethel.

‘No, not really at all, silly. Pretend to, I mean. I think it’s a jolly good idea, don’t you, Paul?’ Positively, Armored was getting quite excited over her strange notion. ‘We could leave all the right clues about, you see, and then set John to detect it. The murder game, with variations.’

‘By Jove, Armored, that’s a great scheme.’ To my surprise Paul de Ravel, whom I would have credited with better sense, was almost as enthusiastic as Armored herself. ‘We should have to act it properly – work out a story and all that – to make sure of leaving just the right clues and no more.’

‘We could get any amount of fun out of it,’ Armored shouted. ‘It’d be better than all the charades in the world.’

‘Every time. What do you say, darling?’ Naturally Paul had to refer the thing to his wife before taking any decision.

Mrs de Ravel stretched herself delicately; her polished skin, very white, gleamed in the lamplight; her sinuous body seemed to coil itself into a new position in her chair. She had not watched the door once since Eric and Elsa Verity disappeared through it, but I knew, Ethel knew, everyone in the room except her besotted husband knew that she was waiting, waiting, waiting; just doing nothing at all but waiting. And for what? That nobody knew.

She smiled at her husband – a curious smile, I thought, in which a faint contempt was blended with a hint of indescribably malicious amusement, as if at some joke that only she could see and which she would not share with anyone. Her words, however, were banal enough, though spoken in those tones of hers which lent a vast significance to the most platitudinous of sentiments. ‘I think the idea has great possibilities,’ she said slowly. It was a lot of preparation for so simple a statement, but that was just like Sylvia de Ravel.

‘We’ll show John up,’ gloated Paul, twirling his little black moustache. One would hardly have thought that the man was turned thirty-five; he was putting himself on a level with Armored.

Ethel and I, as apparently the only members of the gathering to retain our common sense, endeavoured to pour cold water on the idea, but to no purpose. Even John Hillyard added his weight to it.

Indeed he made things even worse. ‘Why confine the showing up to me?’ he said, in his slow way. ‘Why not show up the whole tribe? Make a party of it. Invite them all. Half a dozen at least live this side of Devonshire. I’ll ring them up, if you like; I’ve met most of ‘em’.

‘Yes!’ shrieked Armored. ‘Tell them like this, John: “Tomorrow morning a murder will be committed in the bluebell wood at Minton Deeps. All necessary clues will be in

evidence, and detectives will be admitted to the body five minutes after death. Spot the criminal.” ’

‘That’s the idea,’ grinned John, who really appeared to have taken leave of his senses.

‘Whom can we get?’

I shrugged my shoulders at Ethel with a smile. She smiled back resignedly. The children, I gathered, were to be allowed to have their games.

‘Well, there’s Alicia Dammers, near Exeter,’ John was saying. ‘She’s a distinguished authoress, but she has published a detective story. And Morton Harrogate Bradley, at Salcombe. Oh, plenty of them. Yes, and another distinguished authoress who’s gone in for detective stories as a side line, Mrs Fitzwilliam; you know, she writes under the name of Helen Asche, and – ’

‘Helen Fitzwilliam?’ said a voice from the door. ‘I know her. At least I used to at one time, dam’ well. Nice little woman. What about her?’ It was Scott-Davies, of course. No other man I know would speak of a woman like that.

Armored told him, at the top of her voice.

Eric was good enough to approve. He swaggered into the room and leaned back against the mantelpiece, his hands in his pockets. My presence did not appear to embarrass him in the least.

‘We’ll put it over,’ he said. ‘No, we won’t show old John up; we’ll let him in on it.’ The fellow had quite taken command of the situation, and was now ordering his host about. ‘John, you’ll have to think out a story for us. Usual sort of thing. Quarrel at a house party, what? Hullo Pinkie; dried your hair?’ The man’s effrontery was incredible.

I turned in my chair and pointedly addressed a remark to Mrs de Ravel.

‘Pinkie’s not talking,’ went on the insufferable fellow. ‘Well, John, quarrel at house party. Can you manage that? Now then, who’s to be the corpse?’

‘Well, obviously, you, Eric, my lamb,’ screeched Armorel. ‘Anybody might want to murder you. And anyhow, you couldn’t play any other part, my poor soul.’

‘Right-ho, the corpse for me. And who’s to murder me?’

‘Well, just as obviously,’ sneered Paul de Ravel. ‘Pinkie.’ I never have liked De Ravel.

I was glad to notice that the others looked slightly uncomfortable at this tactless remark.

‘Wait a minute,’ John put in hurriedly. ‘Let’s see if we can’t think of a really brilliant idea for the murderer. Have a quarrel at a house party, by all means; but make that a blind. Have the real murderer someone quite outside the party. Outside the house altogether.’

‘The detective writer’s mind at work,’ breathed Armorel, in pretended awe. ‘Hush, everybody, and listen to the wheels go round.’

‘Carry on, John,’ Eric kindly encouraged his host. That’s the stuff.’

‘Well, we want someone who’s bound to be on the scene in any case,’ John said slowly, ‘so that his presence not only wouldn’t be remarked but wouldn’t even be noticed. Like the postman, in Chesterton’s story. Everybody swore that not a soul had passed, you remember, because though they all saw the postman no one consciously realized him. Can’t we think of someone on those lines? Somebody absolutely insignificant, doing a commonplace job.’

‘Pinkie, talking about his stamp collection,’ guffawed Eric foolishly. Again, I am glad to say, nobody smiled.

‘A ploughman, homeward plodding his weary way,’ suggested Ethel.

‘No-o, not quite,’ dissented her husband.

‘A gamekeeper, complete with gun, shooting rabbits,’ said Armorel. ‘The wicked squire’s made a mess of his daughter,’ she went on, with the complete disregard of the decencies of social converse which one regrets to observe in the present-day young woman, ‘so he conveniently mistakes the squire for a rabbit and pots him.’

‘Not convincing enough,’ sniggered De Ravel. ‘Nobody could mistake Eric for a rabbit. But of course if you switched the rôles round and made Pinkie the corpse - ’

‘Oh, shut up, Paul,’ Armorel snapped.

‘Yes, that’s pretty good, Armorel,’ said John hastily, ‘but I’d like to go one better if possible. They might suspect a gamekeeper. Think of that postman.’

‘I fancy I have an idea,’ drawled Sylvia de Ravel, and she opened her eyes wide and paused to let us prepare our minds for its reception. ‘Not quite on the lines of the postman, perhaps, but on parallel ones. Keep the *motif* of the wicked young man and the daughter, but make the avenging father not a gamekeeper but the local policeman. He, presumably, would have discovered the body: not murdered it. His presence would certainly be unquestioned.’

‘Magnificent, Sylvia,’ applauded John. ‘The very thing. Yes, that’s the secret motive, and the quarrel among the house party is all eyewash. Why, none of our distinguished victims will ever dream of a hostile cross-examination of the policeman in charge of the body.’

‘Yes, that’s great, Sylvia,’ roared Eric. ‘And by Jove, old Pinkie shall play the policeman. Pinkie as a policeman! Can’t you just see him, eh?’

‘Certainly,’ I smiled quietly. ‘Certainly I’ll play the policeman, if it will amuse anyone.’ For after all, if the thing were decided it would have been spoiling sport on my part to refuse to take part in it; and in any case, I was not going



to allow Eric Scott-Davies to put me out of countenance like that.

There was quite a little round of applause at my words, and I gathered that I was unanimously elected to play the star rôle of the policeman. Again it may have been foolish of me, but I experienced quite a little thrill of pleasure, childlike though I knew it to be, at the absurd honour. And incidentally Eric Scott-Davies looked rather foolish at the way his words had been turned against him by the others.

Elsa Verity too, who had not spoken a word since her reappearance with Eric, smiled and nodded her encouragement.

‘Go on, John,’ Armorer was urging. ‘Go and ring up now. Spend pounds while the iron’s hot. You’ll be thinking better of it tomorrow. We’ll do your real work for you in here.’

John rose. ‘Very well, perhaps I’d better. Cyril, you might come along with me and look up the numbers.’

I followed him out of the room. John has never been notorious for tact, but his manoeuvre to separate me from Eric Scott-Davies, though obvious, was well enough meant, and I was by no means sorry to take advantage of it.

We must have been absent from the room nearly three quarters of an hour. During that time John seemed to me to be talking to most of the authors in Devonshire, but only three were able to come the next day. In a hurried preliminary conversation John and I agreed that we could hardly be ready in the morning, and the little farce must be played in the afternoon. We were therefore able to return to the drawing room with the information that Mr Morton Harrogate Bradley, the well known detective-story novelist, Professor Johnson of Bolberry University, who wrote under the name of ‘A W Henry’, and Helen Asche (or Mrs Fitzwilliam), were coming to lunch on the following day, prepared to make sport for us. Ethel of course threw up her

hands and objected that it was impossible to lunch three extra people at such short notice, but the others, including John, made light of her protests.

It was now past eleven o'clock, but the discussion was still in full swing. Whatever happened, it seemed, a story must be decided upon before anyone went to bed.

'Come on, John,' Eric commanded. 'We don't seem to be getting any further. Set the machinery to work.'

'We must have a really convincing quarrel, you see,' Armorel amplified. 'They're sure to question us about it, and we ought to have our answers pat.'

'Ought to act it really, as I said,' put in De Ravel. 'Get the details then. It's details that make a thing sound convincing, isn't it, John?'

'Yes, but how on earth does one invent a quarrel to bring in – what is it? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven people, John?' Armorel demanded.

John helped himself to another whisky-and-soda, leaned back in his chair, and looked his most authorish. 'Well-I-I-I,' he debated. To everyone's surprise Mrs de Ravel leaned forward. 'If I might make a suggestion?' she said slowly. 'Of course,' John said. 'Good gracious, yes, do. You've already solved our main problem for us. Can you solve this one too?' Mrs de Ravel made her usual long pause. 'I think so,' she said, more slowly still.

I fancy everyone had something of the same feeling as myself, namely that Mrs de Ravel's manner was ominous. Even discounting her invariable attempt to produce an impression, I had an uncomfortable impression of something really sinister pending as she leaned forward in her chair and looked round at each of us with her glinting green eyes.

'After all,' she went on, in a more normal voice (though Mrs de Ravel's voice can never be called quite normal),

'after all, why bother to invent a fresh set of characters? Why not just impersonate ourselves, so to speak?'

'Impersonate ourselves?' said Ethel placidly. 'What an odd idea!'

'But so simple,' smiled Mrs de Ravel in her silkiest tones, like black satin. 'Then all we need do is to invent the situation. Now let me see: what is the most improbable situation for us six? Detective-story quarrels always involve such an improbable situation, don't they, John? Well, what about something like this?'

She paused again, and looked round at us. And now there was quite definitely in her eyes that look of malicious gloating I fancied I had detected there before. I began to feel more and more uncomfortable. Something quite unfortunate was coming, I made no doubt.

I was right. It came.

'Suppose that Eric has been my lover.'

I don't know what the others did, but I know that I caught my own breath with something like a gasp. The calm way in which the woman spoke these terrible words simply left me breathless.

'Suppose that Eric has been my lover,' she repeated, her eyes fixed now on John. 'And suppose that he still loves me, and I him, but that for financial reasons he has decided that he must give me up, and marry for money - marry, we'll say, some silly, empty-headed, bread-and-butter miss, for *his* bread and butter. Could you act that part, do think?' she said suddenly, almost fiercely, turning upon Miss Verity.

'I - I think so,' Elsa Verity stammered, as if taken aback (and certainly she had good cause to be so). 'I'll - try, if you like.'

'Good!' said Mrs de Ravel, and it seemed to my alarmed imagination that the way she spoke the word was like a cry

of malignant triumph. 'But you, Miss Verity, are the ward of John and Ethel, and they don't at all want you to marry a man like Eric - '

'Oh, I'm to be your ward, John,' interrupted Elsa, in sheer nervousness. 'How nice!'

' - a man like Eric,' pursued Mrs de Ravel implacably, 'whom they consider a wastrel and a rotter. Wrongly, no doubt, but they do. You don't mind, Eric,' she drawled, 'being considered a wastrel and a rotter for the sake of my plot?'

'Only too charmed,' Eric tried to grin, but his attempt was feeble and I could see that the man's alarm was little less than my own. And as for myself, my discomfort was by now so acute that the sensation was almost physical.

But Mrs de Ravel would spare none of us. 'Unfortunately, however, Paul has discovered the truth about me and Eric, through overhearing a scene between us in which I tax my lover with intending to give me up for mere money, and threaten that if I cannot have him no woman shall. That, you see, dearest,' she added to her husband, 'gives you a motive for killing Eric, too.' I had never heard Mrs de Ravel use an endearment to her husband before, nor did I ever again; and it seemed, as she said it, the most terrible thing I had ever heard.

It was almost incredible that the numbskull had perceived no hidden meaning in his wife's words, but apparently he had not. 'That's right,' he nodded, stroking his little black moustache with a complacent air and completely oblivious of the electricity with which the room seemed filled. 'That's right. I could shoot you like a dog, eh, Eric?'

'Like a definition bow-wow,' Eric agreed, but his usual blatant laugh failed to ring out. I noticed him casting uneasy glances at John as if imploring help. Even Eric's thick hide had been riddled.

John did speak, but he gave Eric no help. To my astonishment he was just as cool as ever. My opinion of John rose very rapidly at that moment. I had done him an injustice. 'That's very good, Sylvia,' he said, in quite his normal tones. 'I should think that ought to do very well. It gives, as you say, Paul a motive, and myself a motive because I'm so fond of Elsa that I'd rather run the risk of hanging than see her married to such a low fellow as Eric. No, I'm afraid Sylvia's plot doesn't leave you with much of a character, Eric.'

'Doesn't seem to,' Scott-Davies mumbled. He was not a good prevaricator.

'And of course it gives you a motive too, Sylvia,' John pursued tranquilly.

'Oh, yes,' nodded Mrs de Ravel. 'Oh, yes. It gives me a motive too.'

'Poor Eric!' laughed Elsa, still somewhat nervously. I think she saw that something curious was happening, but did not understand what. 'Poor Eric! Everybody seems to want to kill him except me. Never mind, Eric. I don't, you know.'

'No,' John agreed. 'I'm afraid nobody could find a motive for you, Elsa. You'll have to be content with being the cause of all the trouble.'

'I feel terribly important,' tremulously smiled the dear child.

'And if Cyril plays the policeman he's out of it too,' continued John, who had now placidly taken things into his own hands. 'And so is Ethel. As a model hostess she's far too busy housekeeping for the party to have time for killing any of it. But Armored - '

'Hullo?' said Armored. She tried to speak naturally, but I noticed a little quiver in her voice. She of course had missed nothing of what had passed. 'Don't say you're going to give me a motive for wiping out Eric too?'

‘Oh, yes; we must have you in. What do you suggest, Sylvia? Couldn’t Armorel be violently in love with Eric too?’

‘Oh, my God,’ said Armorel coarsely.

‘We mustn’t strain the probabilities too far,’ glinted Mrs de Ravel.

‘Anyhow, what’s the idea, John?’ Armorel demanded. ‘Am I one of those trying females who devour their mates? Like the spider, or whatever they used to teach us.’

‘No, I think something like this. You love Eric, and in spite of his entanglements you think he loves you, so being a romantic young woman you’re all for a suicide pact, and – ’

‘One minute, John,’ drawled Mrs de Ravel. ‘We mustn’t have too much of the same kind of motive, surely. Why not give Armorel a different one? If Eric dies, let us say, she inherits Stukeleigh and whatever is left of the family fortunes that Eric has not squandered. You’ll have to be a squanderer as well as a cad, Eric, for my plot.’

This time Eric was able only to grunt. I looked at Armorel. She had gone as white as the white dress she was wearing.

But Mrs de Ravel would have no mercy. ‘There’s been some talk of Eric selling Stukeleigh, you see,’ she continued deftly, her eyes fixed on Armorel. ‘You, a person of far more delicate sensibilities than Eric, are naturally horrified at the idea. Besides, you want it for yourself. Wouldn’t that be better, John?’

‘Perhaps it would,’ said John, but he spoke a little doubtfully.

I was still looking at Armorel. In spite of desperate attempts to control herself the girl was visibly shaken. Had my imagination been unkindly stimulated by Mrs de Ravel’s words, or was there really only too sound a basis for this new insinuation? In any case, the woman was a devil.

Armored bit her lip. 'V - very well,' she said uncertainly. 'That's all right for me.' I had never seen Armored Scott-Davies lose her self-possession before.

Again John took charge. He began to tell us what we should do, setting out the closest details: how I was to follow Eric down to the stream, where he was to go and where I was to catch him up, how I was to get from him the gun he had under his arm, and all the rest of it. Mrs de Ravel took up the discussion with him about the quarrel in the house party. She insisted that her husband's suggestion of acting it, in order to be pat with convincing answers on its details, should be adopted. John was not sure we need bother to do that. They argued, and eventually, backed by De Ravel himself, Mrs de Ravel carried the point.

It may all have been most interesting and amusing. No doubt it was. But I found myself unable to pay the least attention to it. There is a trite metaphor about sitting on the edge of a volcano. If ever I have felt myself to be on the edge of a metaphorical volcano it was in Ethel's drawing room that evening.

When at last, well past one o'clock, we finally did disperse to bed, I made an opportunity for a word alone with Ethel. I told her frankly that the thing should be stopped. 'Believe me,' I said earnestly, 'Mrs de Ravel is dangerous. I'm certain she has some plan of her own in mind.'

To my astonishment I perceived that Ethel's eyes were sparkling with excitement. 'I know,' she said rapidly. 'I know she has. She's going to strike at last, in her own way. Don't interfere, Cyril, *please*. Things are going better than anything I could possibly have arranged myself.'

'But the danger is over,' I protested. 'After this evening, I should hardly imagine that Miss Verity could fail to see Eric in his true colours. There will be no more thought of an

engagement. So why let Mrs de Ravel play with fire in this way?’

‘Listen, Cyril. I watched Elsa closely this evening. She’s hopelessly in love. You can be sure that Eric, when he took her out, succeeded in explaining away that business. Didn’t you see how different her manner to him was after they came back? I tell you, the danger has never been so great as it is now, and I’ll stop at nothing – nothing, I tell you! – to prevent it. Certainly I’ll let Sylvia have as free a hand as she wants.’

‘But what do you think she has in mind?’

‘I’m not sure. It’s something to do with this story she insists on our acting, obviously. I’ll tell you what I think: if she’s sure she’s lost Eric for good and all, she’d tell Paul the truth rather than let him get Elsa. Well, if she does, *I’m* not going to stop her. What does a rift between the De Ravels weigh against Elsa’s whole future?’

‘You’re convinced, then, that if the truth does come out Miss Verity will have nothing more to do with Scott-Davies?’

‘No,’ said Ethel slowly. ‘I’m not. I can only hope so. I believe really that we’re playing against time. If only their engagement isn’t announced before she learns the truth, I think she’d have nothing to do with him; if it is, I’m afraid she might persuade herself to believe him against everyone. Elsa is very loyal.’

There was a short silence between us.

‘Ethel,’ I said, more earnestly than I usually care to speak, ‘Ethel, abandon the whole plan. I confess, frankly, I’m afraid of what may happen. You’re playing with fire.’

‘No,’ Ethel smiled. ‘Not fire; only candles. And the game is worth them. Good-night, Cyril.’

It was in a more than uneasy mood that I sought my room, and sleep did not come for long after I got into bed. The



events of the evening had left me spiritually battered, and it was a state not only to which I was unaccustomed but which I did not care for at all. That Mrs de Ravel had something desperate in mind I could not doubt, and it seemed to me madness on Ethel's part to allow her to proceed with it. And yet - if she was right and the danger of an engagement between that poor deluded child and the unspeakable Scott-Davies was really so imminent, was it not worth while risking anything in the world to prevent it?

I turned uneasily between my sheets. The more I contemplated that engagement, the more filled with horror of it I became. It *was* impossible. Ethel was right.

It was not until well into the small hours that a startling thought came to me. Why did I feel so strongly in this matter? Why was I not pursuing my usual policy of leaving other people's troubles to look after themselves - of remaining aloof from the complexity of interfering in other people's affairs? What was the mainspring of this real horror I felt of a marriage between Scott-Davies and Elsa Verity? Could it be, could it possibly be, that I had fallen in love with the girl myself?

Once this extraordinary idea had presented itself, I lost no time in examining it very thoroughly. I had never been in love, so far as I know, so that the characteristics of the state were unknown to me; but it seemed that if I were in love with Miss Verity I should definitely want to marry her. Did I wish to marry her? Indubitably (I realized with relief) I did not. She was a charming girl, compared with Armored Scott-Davies she was idyllic; but it was useless to pretend that she was not something of a nonentity, her character seemed far more negative than positive, she was no whetstone for the sharpening of wits. And though one may cherish an idyll, does one ever want to marry it? Theocritus is admirable for the enjoyment of an idle hour, none better; but one could not possibly read Theocritus morning, noon,

and night. No, for serious consideration one falls back on something more solid than an idyll.

I liked Elsa Verity very much indeed, I pitied her innocence with all my heart, I was as anxious to prevent her from being crushed as one would be concerning a delicate flower growing too near the edge of the path; but love her? No, thank goodness; a hundred times no.

## **chapter four**

I am telling this story not at all well. I began the last chapter with a reference to Armorel's invitation to me, on the morning following that fateful evening, to help her gather bluebells for lunch. I had to excuse myself, because John had selected the place in the woods which was to be the scene of the supposed murder, and I had to familiarize myself with it and carry out certain arrangements in preparation for the afternoon. These arrangements completed, I glanced at my watch and saw that it was barely eleven o'clock. The pretended quarrel in the house party was to be enacted at twelve o'clock, and I was not looking forward to it in the least. In the meantime I would have half an hour to spare for Armorel and the bluebells.

I have probably made it plain that I do not care for the type of young woman which Armorel Scott-Davies represents, with her cigarettes and her lipstick (I believe that is the term); on the other hand her well-meant attempts to atone for her cousin's boorishness had touched me, and I thought it only kind to requite them. I made my way along the stream to the bluebell wood. Elsa Verity, I may say, had gone into Budeford with Scott-Davies in his car on the excuse of purchasing a false beard for De Ravel, without which the poor fool had pronounced it impossible to play the part of a deceived husband. Little enough of a false beard he had needed to play the part in unwitting reality! But the fact of Miss Verity's disappearance lent ominous significance to Ethel's words of the night before.

The bluebell wood at Minton Deeps is about an acre in extent, composed of large trees and thick but not dense undergrowth; it lies along the lower slope of the steep valley and is bordered by the stream. The winding path which is the main way through it follows more or less the margin of the rivulet. I had gone almost the whole length of this path, pausing occasionally to call in subdued tones for Armorel but without response, when, reaching the conclusion that she must have completed her task and departed, I determined to strike uphill along one of the many narrow tracks that traverse the woods, and so reach the house that way through the fields. I had passed about halfway through the wood, still keeping a lookout for her pale brown linen dress in the distance, when I all but fell over Armorel herself at a twist in the track. She was lying at full length, a sheaf of bluebells near her, her face to the ground, and it was evident even to my inexperience that she was sobbing bitterly.

I paused in some confusion, for feminine tears I have always endeavoured to avoid; they are embarrassing, emotionally disturbing, and by no means always necessary. Armorel's tears were, in addition, astonishing. If I had not actually seen it, I could hardly have imagined Armorel weeping.

In the ordinary course I should have slipped unobtrusively away, pretending that I had noticed nothing, and perhaps whistling a gay little tune to aid the deception. At present, however, this was impossible; the girl was lying not merely at my feet but right across my path. I could not but be cognizant of her presence.

I determined to put as good a face on it as possible. 'Ah, Armorel, here you are,' I said, as cheerfully as I could. 'So you've picked the bluebells, I see. I'll tell Ethel. She'll be delighted.'

Armored had sat up with a violent start, keeping her face still turned from me. I made as if to pass on my way.

Then compunction overcame me. In vain I reminded myself that feminine tears were rarely as serious as they appeared. I felt that I must at least offer some consolation. 'Is anything the matter, Armored?' I asked, in considerable embarrassment.

She shook her averted head. 'No, thanks. Just making a fool of myself, that's all.'

'There's nothing I can do?' I hesitated, feeling absurdly that there were probably a great number of things I could do, but not able to recognize exactly what.

'No.' Suddenly she turned her tear-stained face towards me and spoke with an intensity that I can only describe as ferocious. 'Yes, there is though. Sit down and tell me how much you hate Eric. You do hate him, don't you? I wonder if you hate him as much as I do.'

'Armored!' I had to protest, but I sat down nevertheless.

Armored gave me a rather watery smile. 'You're a good sort really, Pinkie,' she went on in more normal tones, brushing the lingering tears from her eyes, 'under all that prim stiff-and-starchiness. Most men when they see a girl howling think it a fine excuse to get their hands on her, you know.'

'I trust,' I said, perhaps a little stiffly, 'that I should never take advantage of a woman's distress to proceed to such unwarrantable liberties. Not indeed that I have the faintest wish to "get my hands", as you term it, on any girl.' But I could not help feeling that it might perhaps be not at all unattractive to play the rôle of manual comforter in some cases which I need not specify.

Fortunately Armored did not perceive this unworthy reflection. 'No,' she replied, 'I really don't believe you have. And that's probably why I want to let myself go at this

moment and simply yowl on your shoulder. Could you bear it?’

It was a strange proposal for me to hear, and a bare twenty-four hours ago I should have condemned it out of hand as the suggestion of a forward minx. And yet I could perceive now that it was nothing of the sort. Had my earnest reflections of the small hours given me something of a deeper insight into the opposite sex? I hope I have none of that foolish pride which forbids a man to admit that he has been in the wrong, and I confess freely that some at any rate of my former opinions regarding women had been quite mistaken. Armorel herself, for instance, was taking on quite a different aspect. Instead of the hard, man-aping, frivolous-minded young woman I had fancied her, I realized suddenly now that these affectations were just the manifestations of an immature mind, realizing and ashamed (however unnecessarily) of its youth, and trying desperately to appear mature. I had mistaken the outward signs for the inward lack of grace. The lipstick, the paint, and the cigarettes were non-essentials, mere excrescences on a simple and quite possibly a not unpleasant nature. Her request of a moment ago was not a piece of calculated coquetry; it was just an appeal for sympathy and comfort.

These reflections passed through my mind instantaneously; yet though I recognized their truth, the situation seemed to lose nothing of its embarrassment. ‘If it would really afford you any relief, my dear girl,’ I said with unwonted diffidence, ‘I should be most pleased for you - er - to make use of me in any - that is - ’

But before I could bring this halting sentence to a conclusion Armorel’s head was already on my shoulder, and Armorel’s tears had broken out afresh. ‘It’s true,’ she sobbed. ‘It’s perfectly true, what that damned woman said. How the hell did she know? It’s supposed to be secret. Eric *is* going to sell Stukeleigh!’

‘No!’ I exclaimed, my stupefaction such that I actually forgot for the moment that I was holding, like any hero of a nineteenth-century novel, a weeping young woman in my arms. A Paladin in Pince-nez indeed!

‘Yes. And the way she said it seems to have brought it home to me worse than ever. Oh, Pinkie, it – it makes me feel too *awful*.’

We sat for a few moments in silence, as if under a common shock. In truth Armorel’s news had quite upset me. It distresses me, almost as if I had a personal interest in it, to hear of a fine old mansion passing out of the hands of the family that has owned it for centuries: and in this case... Stukeleigh, the Scott-Davies’ home, was a magnificent Tudor country house, one of the finest examples of Tudor domestic architecture (a period in which I am exceedingly interested) in the country.

‘And not only Stukeleigh,’ Armorel’s voice went on drearily, ‘but everything that belongs to it – the furniture, that lovely little village, the lands, and – and the pictures.’

So the rumours had been true. Eric Scott-Davies, last ignoble remnant of a proud house, was preparing to sell not only the portraits of his ancestors but their very home.

‘Can’t he be stopped?’ I muttered. ‘How could he possibly do such a thing?’

‘Oh, it means nothing to him. Less than nothing. That’s almost more awful, in a way. He was brought up there, every one of them’s been brought up there for hundreds of years, all their pictures hang on the walls they lived in – and it all means less than nothing to Eric.’

I admit that I was surprised that it should mean quite so much to Armorel. Apparently I allowed my feelings to be divined, for she twisted suddenly away from me and burst out fiercely: ‘Oh, I know what you’re thinking. Just because I smoke, and use slang, and don’t behave like the nice girls

you knew when you were a boy in the year dot, you think I've got no feelings. My God, Pinkie, if you knew! I tell you, I love every brick of Stukeleigh, and every blade of grass in the park, and every reed in the cottagers' thatches, so much that it's like a knife turning in my tummy to think of it being sold.'

'It's terrible,' I agreed, deprecating this dramatic outburst, but well able in the circumstances to excuse it.

'And it's so unnecessary. If I were in Eric's place I could manage perfectly on what's left, even now. Stukeleigh does just pay for itself, run properly.'

'And do I understand that on Eric's death you inherit?' I ventured.

Armored sat, her arms round her knees, looking moodily at her toes. Her feet, I noticed for the first time, were small and particularly well-shaped. 'Oh, yes, that woman got it all right. How the hell she knew I can't imagine, but it's true enough. According to Uncle's will, if Eric dies unmarried I get Stukeleigh. Almost makes one wish he would, doesn't it? And pretty quickly too. Oh, I know I'm a beast even to think of such a thing, but Pinkie, he doesn't *deserve* Stukeleigh.'

'He does not,' I agreed fervently. I could not remonstrate with her for the terrible sentiment she had just expressed, for to my discomfort she was already crying again.

I touched her arm tentatively, with the intention of expressing my silent sympathy, and to my surprise she leaned towards me again and rested her head on my shoulder. It was the action of a child, I knew, so that I had no excuse at all for the unwarrantable action of my own which followed. I, who had only a few minutes ago repudiated with indignation the suggestion that I could ever take advantage of a woman's distress - I, who had never done such a thing in my life before - well, something quite extraordinary



seemed to go 'Click!' in my interior, and in the confusion of the moment I kissed Armorel.

She sat up abruptly, a faint flush on her cheeks, and looked at me. There was no need of upbraiding, for no one could have been more ashamed than I the next moment. Only too well I knew that I had betrayed the poor girl's trust.

She was generous. She did not speak angrily. 'Pinkie,' she said slowly (and even in my shame I was able to notice that her tears at least had stopped flowing), 'do you often do that sort of thing?'

'No, Armorel,' I assured her with all the earnestness at my command. 'Indeed not. I assure you, I can't understand it at all... I was carried away, in some inexplicable manner. I apologize most sincerely.'

'Am I the first girl you've ever kissed?'

'I fear so,' I said, in futile endeavour to minimize my offence. 'Yes, I'm quite sure of it. Yes, certainly you are. I don't understand it at all. Really, I - '

'Well, next time, when a fool of a girl's howling on your shoulder, she doesn't *want* to be kissed on the forehead, remember.'

'No,' I stammered in confusion. This grave censure by a young woman so many years my junior, whom hitherto I had been unable to regard even with equanimity, let alone approval, was disconcerting in the extreme; and yet I could not say that I did not deserve it. 'No, precisely. It was the action of a cad. If you could bring yourself to trust me again... That is - '

I stopped in astonishment. Armorel was leaning towards me, and I saw now that, though her eyes were still full of tears, she was actually smiling. 'No, Pinkie,' she said softly, 'she doesn't want to be kissed on the forehead a bit. She wants to be kissed on the lips.'

As to what happened after that, I really cannot bring myself to put it on paper.

It was only a few minutes before twelve when we rose to leave the wood. And I had better admit at once that I did so with no little reluctance. I intend to set down in this narrative the precise truth, however ill it may reflect on myself.

And yet the reader cannot condemn me more severely than I condemned myself on our rather silent walk back to the house. Although my mind was still in considerable confusion, I did my best to apply my old methods of self-analysis, in an effort to realize how it had happened that I, of all people, should have come to such a pass. For even as early as that the most astonishing feature of the whole affair was plain to me: that I had so very much *enjoyed* kissing Armorel. It had really been a quite entrancing sensation. Incredible!

For I must explain that I had been accustomed, in my ignorance, to regard the act of osculation as an unnecessary and degrading one, practically on a par with the savage habit of rubbing noses, certainly no more dignified or satisfactory. I perceived now that I had been exceedingly mistaken.

But did it mean that because I had enjoyed kissing Armorel, I was in love with her? Can one enjoy kissing a woman whom one does not love? It seemed highly improbable. And yet, if I was not in love with Elsa, I could not possibly be in love with Armorel, for I certainly wished to marry her no more than the other. Then why had I enjoyed kissing her? Why did I wish to kiss her again? It was all very disturbing and confusing. I wished that I knew more about these things.

Fortunately the others scarcely noticed our entrance, though I felt as if my guilt must be written in capital letters

on my face. They were engaged in an altercation. Eric, it seemed, did not want to enact the scene which had been sketched out for himself and Mrs de Ravel. The others were insisting that he should. I could hardly blame Eric. The situation was exceedingly awkward for him.

Somewhat to my surprise Armored at once threw the full weight of her persuasion into the scale. 'Oh, come on, Eric. Don't spoil the party. Why on earth shouldn't we act it? You're not the only one. I've got a scene with you too, remember. I'm madly in love with you. Oh, Eric, darling, how could you treat a poor maiden so? Give up all the others, and return to me!' For it had been decided in the end that John's original suggestion should be followed.

And so the comedy, thinly masking the drama underneath, began. Eric could hardly refuse to follow such a direct lead without giving something of the truth away to Miss Verity. Armored practically forced him to play up to her. We others ranged ourselves on chairs at one end of the drawing room; the other end was tacitly adopted as the stage.

Dunderheaded in his own conceit though he was, Eric could not but realize that the atmosphere was electric. His nervousness found a disguise in wildly burlesquing the scene between himself and his cousin. I thought I understood, too, that there was the sound method in his foolery of setting up this precedent of burlesque in view of the next scene. But I could not laugh. Apprehension filled me, even to the extent of crowding the consideration of my own recent and upsetting experiences from my mind. What was Mrs de Ravel's intention, as she sat there watching, a faint, inscrutable smile just lifting the corners of her expressive mouth?

One consolation at least I had, both for myself and for all of us. No engagement had yet been announced between Elsa and Eric.

With wide smiles the two were now protesting undying love in extravagant terms, agreeing with exaggerated grief that they could never belong to one another; in highly incongruous slang Armorel urged the pact of suicide, which Eric refused in the manner of a fourth-rate tragedian. Armorel made her exit from the stage sobbing loudly. There was no trace, either in her manner or her features, of her recent emotion. I was amazed at the feminine power of dissimulation.

Then Mrs de Ravel rose - and I for one drew a sharp breath.

From the very beginning it was clear that my worst fears were to be more than realized. With infinite care Sylvia de Ravel had made her opportunity; now she was going to use it. Everything, every single thing, was to be thrown into the scales before us all. It was, after all, the actress' superb gesture.

A feeling of positive suffocation grew on me as I watched. This was no acting, magnificent actress though the woman might be. She loved him - really loved the fellow: that was only too plain. It was inconceivable that anyone could imagine it acting, even her witless husband, watching her too with almost painful concentration, the foolish jests dead on his lips. And poor little Elsa Verity, with white cheeks and bitten lip...

There was a breathlessly dead silence as she swept up to him and hurled her lovely form into arms. 'Eric - my darling!' she breathed.

In obvious discomfiture he attempted some silly joke, only to have it stifled against his mouth in a long and fierce kiss - a kiss so evidently real that it gave me acute embarrassment to observe.

And then a flood of words broke from her.

I will not attempt to give them. I could not if I wanted to do so. I only know that, amid the most shameless avowals of her passion, she cited chapter and verse, times, places even, of a string of their amorous interludes, detailing incidents of the most intimate description that could obviously never have been imagined, revealing brutally the subterfuges that had been adopted to deceive her husband, laying bare the relations between the two of them with a candour that in a few seconds had us all crimson with embarrassment. To all eyes it was a woman desperately in love, knowing herself in imminent danger of being cast off, striving with every means in her power, only too physical as well as vocal, to retain her lover's affection – spending herself on the effort in a way that left her with neither dignity, modesty, nor self-respect. A terrible spectacle.

Covertly from time to time I plucked up moral courage to steal a glance at De Ravel. It was incredible that he should not be learning the truth at last. Apart from his wife's manner, which in itself left no room but for conviction, the way in which she seemed bent on hammering it home to him by actual proof upon proof of his cuckoldom, afforded him no chance of further blindness. And the tensivity of his attitude and his staring eyes seemed equally plain proof that he had understood. I don't think I am a coward (the reader may have formed his own opinion on that point), but I do not mind confessing that I was really alarmed. What had Ethel stirred up?

And what, I found time to wonder, was in Mrs de Ravel's own mind? That at least I thought I could guess. She was warning Eric: warning him terribly. If he would take her back and give up Elsa, she would tell her husband that she had only been acting all the time (and from the contempt with which she referred to him in her rôle, it was clear that she had no doubt of her power to twist the besotted fool to any belief she chose); if not, she would tell him that it had been

the truth. Deliberately, for all her passion, she was trying to win back her lover by sheer terror.

And that she was terrifying him was plain to see. Time and time again he tried to stem the torrent of her awful confessions, his ruddy face almost as pale as Elsa's own, even to the extent of drowning her voice in his. It was useless. Neither half-hearted bluster nor downright appeal (with difficulty kept in character) could make her more than pause; and when, in something like real panic, he tried to escape from the room, she simply clung to him so that he could not move. If I still bore Eric any vengeful feelings over the incident in the swimming pool, they were surely glutted in those throat-constricting ten minutes. I was really sorry for the man.

No one in Mrs de Ravel's audience could have felt very differently from myself. Armored was standing like a statue by the door, her mouth slightly open; Ethel actually hid her face in her hands; on Paul and Elsa I have already touched. Only John, for whom my respect was mounting higher and higher, appeared on the surface to be entirely unmoved. Clapping his hands gently from time to time, he would ejaculate softly: 'Bravo! Magnificent, Sylvia! Keep it up!' I wonder nobody screamed at him.

It was over at last, and I for one felt like a piece of wet cloth. But with Sylvia de Ravel's blessed silence (and never have I welcomed silence more wholeheartedly) the tension, after a momentary drop, rose even higher: what would Paul do? I looked warily at his hands, positively shaking on his knees, ready to intervene if he showed signs of attacking Eric then and there before us all, as indeed I more than half believed he would. The fellow was obviously strung up almost beyond endurance. We were all looking at him with fearful attention, Eric from a position almost of self-defence; even his wife, who had dropped into a chair as if exhausted,

was regarding him with a half-frightened, half-defiant air of sulkiness.

He laughed jerkily. 'Good gracious, Sylvia, why did you leave the stage? Upon my word, I could almost have believed you meant it all, if I hadn't known you so well. Phew! Well, you certainly got me, old girl.' He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, with hands that still trembled.

Could one have believed it? The numskull refused to hear the truth when it was shouted in his very ear! Could uxoriousness go further?

But poor little Elsa Verity! She was making the bravest attempt to smile, but in her face at any rate was horrified disillusionment. I exchanged glances with Ethel. She nodded and beamed. I understood. Her end had been triumphantly gained without Paul de Ravel having been enlightened at all. One look at Elsa, and the way the child's eyes avoided painfully the neighbourhood of Eric, was enough to show that no further danger existed of any engagement.

My heart (to use a poetical metaphor) sang in my bosom.

There is little more to tell. With De Ravel's final proof of his incredible fatuousness the proceedings reverted abruptly to farce again. The jealous-husband scene between himself and Eric was, I make no doubt, a miracle of the comic spirit. Myself, I found it a miracle of tragic irony, but that was no longer either here or there.

Our prologue was over.

Yet not quite over. One conclusive scene remained to be played.

As soon as conversation broke out (a little hectically perhaps) on the conclusion of the comic jealous-husband scene, Miss Verity rose. I, standing solicitously by, noticed that she did so a little unsteadily, and was prompt to offer my arm; it was refused with a wan smile. 'I've got rather a

headache, Aunt Ethel,' she said in subdued tones. 'I think I'll lie down till lunch.'

'Headache?' officiously put in Eric, now quite recovered. 'Rotten luck. Well, best thing for a headache's a swim. Get your costume on, and come down for a quick bathe before lunch; we've just time.'

I waited for the *coup de grâce*. It came.

'Thank you,' said the child, with pathetic dignity. 'I'd rather lie down.'

She went out of the room

Eric must needs follow her, of course; but I did not mind that. The fellow's spell was broken now.

I glanced at my watch. The time was half-past twelve. Our guests could be expected at any moment now and Ethel in consequence had only time for a happy smile and a nod in my direction before hurrying away to pursue her duties as hostess. With a smile to myself, but secret and ironical, I watched De Ravel slip an arm through his wife's and draw her out into the garden, no doubt to congratulate her on her remarkable acting.

Then, with a start, I realized that John had disappeared too. Armorel and I were left alone together.

Why did a strange sensation invade the pit of my stomach, and my mouth go suddenly dry? It was exceedingly odd.

To my relief, however, Armorel made not the slightest reference to our recent encounter. She helped herself to a cigarette from John's silver box and threw herself, with all her usual lack of grace, into a chair. 'Phew!' she said.

It would have been foolish to pretend to misunderstand her. 'Exactly,' I agreed.

'As for Paul!' Armorel made a gesture of somewhat distressing vulgarity. 'Well, it's almost as if he knew



ignorance was bliss, and dam' well refuses to be wise.'

'That is really very succinctly put, Armorel,' I remarked, not without surprise.

'Oh, I'm not always quite such a fool as you think me. Pinkie,' Armorel said carelessly.

'Well, at any rate Eric's embarrassments are presumably over,' I said, steering the conversation into safer waters. 'At least for today.'

'Shouldn't be too sure of that,' she laughed. 'He's still got Helen Fitzwilliam to face.'

'Helen Fitzwilliam? Oh, Helen Asche, yes. Well, why shouldn't he face her?'

But Armorel shook her head, smiling. I questioned her discreetly (purely with a view to using my tact later should it be required), but she would say no more on the subject.

There followed rather an awkward pause.

I became aware of a remarkable phenomenon: I wanted to kiss Armorel again! I wanted, indeed, quite intensely. I could not understand myself in the least. The girl meant nothing to me; I was not even acutely sorry for her as I was for Miss Verity; it would not, I imagined, occasion me very much distress if I were never to see her again; and yet – I wanted desperately to kiss Armorel Scott-Davies! It was inexplicable. And so was that strange sensation which had returned in full force to my lower abdomen, and that curious sandiness of the mouth.

I leant over her, no doubt a little clumsily, for I am a novice in these matters.

To my astonishment she spoke quite sharply. 'Now then, Pinkie, paws down!'

'I beg your pardon, Armorel?' I said, drawing back stiffly.

'Just because I let you kiss me to give us both something else to think about in a bad half-hour, you needn't think

you've got the grazing rights for good.'

I passed over the extreme vulgarity of this expression in my surprise at her meaning. 'Both of us?'

'Yes, you've got a pash on Elsa, haven't you? Well, I thought if you couldn't get it there, the least I could do was to give you a little gentle browsing myself.'

'Really, Armored,' I said, disgusted by this phrasing, 'am I to understand, then, that you permitted me – no, *asked* me to kiss you purely because you imagined that I should derive a vicarious pleasure from doing so?'

'You can understand what you dam' well like, Pinkie,' she retorted, with quite unnecessary rudeness.

I fear I lost my temper for the moment. 'Then it is fortunate that you won't be called upon to do so again. In future I shall certainly avoid recourse to – to substitutes.' It was absurd to take the girl so seriously as to endeavour to wound her by turning her own mistaken suggestion against her, but really she had been exceedingly provoking.

Armored was staring at me. 'My poor mutt,' she said, 'can't you see that... Oh, well, never mind.'

I should have liked to question her further on this odd, if offensively worded beginning, but at that moment our guests appeared, with John.

Not having been thrown ever very much into the society of writers, I was interested to meet them; but my interest soon gave way to disappointment. They seemed very ordinary persons. Morton Harrogate Bradley, the famous detective-story writer, was a tall, thin young man with a manner, which I very soon found extremely irritating, of languid superiority. I did my best to engage him in what I imagined would be a congenial subject (a discussion upon certain of the more obscure eighteenth-century dramatists, a subject which I had been reading up recently), but to my

annoyance he left me abruptly in mid-sentence to join Armorel, of all people.

Helen Asche (or Mrs Fitzwilliam, to give her her real name) I found little more interesting, for a lady with such a reputation for clever work as she had; indeed, I began to cast my mind back over such books of hers as I had read, questioning whether her fame might not be exaggerated. She was a dark, small woman with an extremely lively manner, not by any means ill-looking; her age I estimated at thirty-five. She seemed to prefer discussing feminine trivialities with Ethel to giving me her opinion on the current literature of the moment, which I thought it my social duty to ask her. Incidentally, I noticed not the faintest sign of embarrassment in her quite casual greeting of Eric, as he entered the room shortly after their arrival. So much for Armorel's hinted gossip.

Professor Johnson, I regret to say, I found positively dull for a man certainly learned and apparently gifted. He insisted on describing to me some abstruse mathematical problem in which I had no interest at all, mumbling into his beard and fumbling with his spectacles in a positively senile way, though the man cannot have been much over fifty. I made my excuses as soon as I saw Miss Verity come into the room, and hurried over towards her.

Eric, however, with his usual insensitive lack of manners, forestalled me. Before I could reach her he was at the door, elbowing his way offensively through the throng of people in the little sitting room - elbowing unceremoniously even, I noticed, past Mrs de Ravel herself.

'Now then, come and have a cocktail, Elsa,' he cried in his boisterous voice, oblivious, it seemed, of all decency.

To my disappointment Miss Verity, instead of ignoring the fellow, actually smiled at him, though she certainly had the grace to blush.

‘Cocktail forward, John, please,’ Eric was shouting. ‘Elsa wants a little sustaining before we break the news.’

A stab of apprehension shot through me, though I knew the fear which caused it to be ludicrous. I glanced at Ethel, and saw that the same thought had occurred to her. I sent her a reassuring smile, but she did not seem to see it.

‘What news, Eric?’ she asked.

He turned from handing a cocktail to Elsa, to grin at her. ‘Glasses full, everybody, please,’ he boomed. ‘You’ve got to drink a toast!’ And his tone added plainly: whether we liked it or not. ‘Elsa and I are engaged to be married.’

The effrontery of the man! The downright criminal effrontery!

## **chapter five**

I hardly knew what happened at the lunch that followed.

I was upset. Exceedingly upset. To the garrulous chatter of my neighbour, Mrs Fitzwilliams, I could make only mechanical responses. The iniquity, the utter iniquity absorbed me of the tragedy that was to fall on that unfortunate child, and which it now seemed we were powerless to prevent. To think of her at the mercy of that blackguard almost made me choke as I ate, and yet I could think of nothing else. All thought of Armored had been completely wiped from my mind. One impossible plan after another passed through my mind for saving Miss Verity even now, only to be rejected at once. As for Ethel, what despair there must be behind her bright, hostess-like smiles, I could only guess.

At Mrs de Ravel I hardly dared look at all. Positively flaunting his fiancée in her face, Eric was taking full vengeance on that misguided but unhappy lady for the fright she had given him an hour ago. The fool, her husband, had of course been loudest in his congratulations upon Eric Scott-Davies' wickedest crime.

Mrs Fitzwilliam must have noticed my absorption, and with an intuition which surprised me (though after all one should have expected it of her) went straight to the heart of the trouble. Looking at me curiously, she said in a low voice during a particularly loud period in the surrounding conversation: 'And what do you think of our friend's engagement?'

I was far too upset to be discreet. I told her that I considered it iniquitous.

‘She seems a nice girl?’

‘She is a charming, unaffected girl,’ I said with heat. ‘It’s nothing short of a crime that her inexperience should be taken advantage of in this way.’

‘I take it that Eric is after her money?’

‘Nothing else. Miss Verity herself,’ I replied bitterly, ‘is merely incidental.’

My neighbour’s curious look deepened. ‘I shouldn’t worry too much, Mr Pinkerton. There’s many a slip, you know. Personally, I should be more than surprised if the wedding ever takes place.’

I could only hope she was right.

After luncheon I excused myself to my hostess and walked down to the woods. I felt it almost a physical impossibility to remain in a company which included Scott-Davies. For half an hour at any rate I had to be alone.

The subsequent proceedings of the afternoon came as a positive relief. Our guests of course knew nothing of the undercurrents in our party, and to concentrate on the programme that had been arranged for them might at least take our minds off more serious affairs. So at least John Hillyard appeared to think, for when I returned to the house I found him impatiently awaiting me. Without a word on the other matter he plunged at once into a detailed examination of myself to make certain that I had forgotten nothing of what I was to do.

I am bound to say that when John does a thing he does it very thoroughly. The main lines of the scene between Scott-Davies and myself had been settled the evening before; immediately after breakfast he had presented me with a list of the most insignificant details, neatly typed out and

including a timetable worked out to the minute, and nothing would then satisfy him but that I should commit it to memory on the spot. Every one of my actions was minutely specified: exactly how long I was to struggle with Eric for the possession of the gun, exactly how far Eric was to be from me when I fired, how I was then to dispose him to give an appearance of accident, how I was to wipe my fingerprints off the gun and substitute others from Eric's own fingertips, every conceivable detail. It all seemed to me most unnecessary, but John was insistent that it was nothing of the sort.

'Why, you've forgotten the blood,' I had chipped him after breakfast, when he gave me the list. 'You can't have a crime of this sort without blood, John.'

'There'd be very little blood indeed from a bullet wound through the back, piercing the heart as this is supposed to do,' quite seriously replied John, who has indeed a very poor sense of humour.

'But a little, I feel sure,' I had continued to banter. 'Eric certainly ought to have the spot of entry of the bullet marked on his coat with a touch of red paint. How otherwise are your detectives to see the exact place of the wound?'

'Well, really, Cyril, that's a very sound idea,' John had positively beamed. 'And as it happens, I have got a bit of red lead somewhere, if no red paint. Yes, you're quite right, he ought.' And he had actually gone off to persuade Eric to allow him to smear one of his coats with red lead!

I do not think I have yet given an account of the mock drama which we were to enact. In order to afford the reader a clear understanding of the events which followed, perhaps I had better do so.

After being accused in the morning by the jealous husband of an affair with his wife, then, Eric was to leave the house after lunch with a rifle under his arm, apparently

to relieve his feelings by endeavouring to shoot a rabbit or two. I, as the village policeman, on my way to the house just then with an official message for John Hillyard, would catch sight of him and, desirous of a few words in private, follow him down towards the stream. I had recognized him as a visitor who had been with the Hillyards for a lengthy stay the year before, during which he had acted like a blackguard towards my pretty daughter. I determined to seize the opportunity to have it out with him.

In the meantime, the members of the house party scatter individually, so that when the supposedly fatal shot is fired each may come under suspicion, in so far that no two of them can provide alibis for each other.

Having caught Eric up at the glade which had been selected for the purpose, I was to begin to upbraid him, and a scene of mutual recrimination would ensue, culminating in physical violence as Eric endeavoured to strike me with the butt of his rifle. I, however, seizing the rifle from him, follow him a few paces as he walks away from me, and discharge the rifle point-blank at his retreating back at a distance of four and a half paces (why precisely four and a half I could not discover, but John seemed bent on it). I was then to drag the body to the side of the glade opposite the stream, where the ground rose in a fairly steep bank, dispose it on its face on the top of this bank in such a way that it would look as if it had fallen there in life, and, having carefully wiped the rifle with my handkerchief to remove my fingerprints, impress those of the pretended corpse on it and lay it just behind him as if it had fallen from his grasp. Then I was to make my way up to the house and ask for John Hillyard.

In the meantime Ethel would discover the body on her way to pick bluebells in the woods and, returning also to the house, give the alarm to me and the household. I would then go back again and take official charge, and our detecting guests would, so to speak, be let loose.



I wrote above that the other members of the party were to scatter individually, but this is only what they were supposed to have done. In actual fact they were all, except Ethel, coming down first to watch Eric and myself, and John had reserved one side of the glade for them, with a way of approach and retirement, where footprints were not to be taken into account. Needless to say, nobody had been allowed that day in the glade itself.

With John's care for detail it was half-past three to the minute that I drew within sight of the house down the steep little lane from the top of the hill behind, clad in a blue reefer jacket (several sizes too large for me) to represent a policeman's tunic and wearing an actual helmet, a treasured relic of one of John's wilder escapades at the University, and feeling, if the truth must be told, not a little foolish; and it was precisely one minute past the half-hour when Eric emerged from the house, the rook rifle duly under his arm, and began to saunter down to the stream. The would-be-detectives were in the drawing room, on their honour not to emerge until the alarm was given, according to John's timetable, in fifteen minutes' time. The others were already down in the valley.

I followed Eric automatically down the hillside. It is unnecessary to give my reflections as I did so; they were not pleasant. I had little stomach for the business in hand, but it had got to be performed.

In the glade Eric pretended, with exaggerated gestures, to be stalking some wild animal, and I caught him up. Thirty yards away I could see, peering out here and there from among the green leaves, the rest of the party, for the most part smiling tolerantly at Eric's buffoonery. John, I noticed, had his watch in his hand.

'Ha!' Eric cried with a ridiculous grimace, as I emerged from the surrounding thicket. 'A minion of the law. Constable Pinkie, by Jove; in outsize helmet. Oh, officer, don't look at

me so crossly. You frighten me so. I always was nervous, from a child.'

I am not going to give my own words. Indeed, I do not remember what they were. I said, as concisely as possible, what John had wished me to convey, but my mind was too busy with matters of real importance to pay much attention to the flummery, or to Eric's characteristic attempts to raise a laugh among the spectators at my expense. As soon as I reasonably could, I advanced towards him and seized his rifle.

'Oh, do be careful, officer,' he implored. 'It's loaded. You might do yourself such a nasty injury. I'm sorry about your daughter, and all that, but do be careful.'

I pulled back the bolt and examined the interior. A blank cartridge, specially prepared by John, was already in the breech.

Eric was now walking away, with a silly, flouncing step, and I noticed that our audience was actually convulsed with laughter at his antics. I followed him swiftly up (remembering the four and a half paces), took aim at his retreating back, and fired. With quite a convincing start, Eric stumbled on to his knees and collapsed on the ground.

That was the easiest part of my task. The more difficult was to convey his massive form to the gap in the undergrowth at the top of the bank on the side of the glade opposite the stream, and our audience. John had endeavoured that morning to teach me what he called 'the fireman's lift', but apparently I was either extremely stupid or wilfully obtuse, for there had seemed to be no hope of my mastering it.

Eric, too, was plainly now being very dead indeed, for his body had gone completely inert. I endeavoured to pull him, first by his arms and then, more maliciously, by his legs, but

could obviously make very little impression. Time, too, was getting short and I had had about enough of the business.

I appealed to John. 'Look here, I really can't do anything if he's going to play the fool like this. He's making himself impossible for me to move.'

'Eric, don't play the goat, there's a good chap,' John shouted.

A sound came from Eric more suggestive of a donkey braying than a goat, and most of the onlookers sniggered loudly; it is astonishing what small things appear to amuse.

It did seem, however, that Eric was ready to pay attention at any rate to John, for this time I did move him; not easily by any means, but by immense labour, which should have left the most convincing footprints, I did succeed in getting him to the required place – though what was happening to his clothes during the process I neither knew nor cared. There I disposed him meticulously as John had ordained, and stood aside in the undergrowth so that my handiwork could be observed and approved. 'Is that correct?' I called.

'Excellent,' John called back.

Humorous even as a corpse, Eric waved a foot in the air in response.

My part was practically at an end, and thankful enough I was for the fact. The rest was (as Armorer would say) 'up to' the others. I retrieved the rifle from the middle of the glade, pretended to wipe my fingerprints off it with my handkerchief, made a great show of impressing those of Eric on it, laid it on the ground just behind him in accordance with my instructions, and began to make my way up the hill. The others hastily scattered to their variously allotted places. So far, so good.

The hillside is very steep from the stream to the house. Feeling quite exhausted by my unnecessary labour in moving Eric I disobeyed John's instructions for the first time

and sat down for a rest at a point where I could overlook the glade and see Ethel discovering the body; it pleased me, too, to be a spectator myself for a change.

Ethel had her directions no less carefully drawn out than Eric and myself. She was to approach the body along a certain line and leave it along another line, so that her two lots of footprints should be distinct from ours; she was to go near enough to the body to have been able to discover that it was a corpse, but not touch or disturb it in any way; she was then to go straight up to the house, outside which she would meet me and give the alarm.

Poor Ethel! It was necessary for her to play her part for the entertainment of her guests; but she could be liking the business no better than myself. As if in derisive greeting, too, I distinctly saw Eric wave his foot in the air to her as she approached; it was all he could wave, for he was lying on his face with his head pillowed on his arms, but poor Ethel must have thought that it would have been in better taste on his part not to wave anything at all. That, however, would hardly have been like Eric Scott-Davies.

She looked at him perfunctorily for a moment with silent distaste, then turned and began slowly to make her way up the path by which I had come. I rose to my feet and hurried on ahead of her.

Loitering purposely as I neared the top, I allowed her to catch me up just outside the house. 'Oh, constable,' she said, with a sad smile, 'I've just seen Mr Scott-Davies in the wood down there. He must have met with an accident. I'm afraid he may be dead.' She looked at me and the smile died out of her face. 'And I only wish he were,' she added slowly, and made her way into the house. I was supposed to have asked her to telephone for a doctor, but we were both past bothering over such details.

I went down the hill again.

Eric was still lying as I had left him; the others were not visible. I occupied myself with making a few small improvements to the *mise-enscène*. Eric did not speak to me and I was glad enough of his silence for once. When I had completed my tasks I moved some little distance away from him, lit a cigarette, and sat down calmly to await the coming of our detectives. During this interval the doctor was supposed to have arrived and examined the body. A copy of his imaginary report to John, together with the constable's, was to be handed to the three on their leaving the house. As I thought of the real situation that faced us, all this mummary seemed inexpressibly futile.

I can pass quickly over the next half-hour.

None of the three so-called detectives would, I imagine, have proved very formidable to a real criminal. No doubt they tried to do their best, but the atmosphere of farce was too strong. Mrs Fitzwilliam had a foolish little nervous giggle which seemed to be in play all the time (the more I saw of that woman the less I could imagine that she could have anything of intelligence to impart to the readers of her books), Morton Harrogate Bradley (what a name!) looked extremely superior but did nothing at all, only Professor Johnson seemed to be making any real efforts to get to the bottom of our little mystery. The other two asked me questions in a perfunctory way, laughing together, but Professor Johnson was the only one really to attempt to examine the footprints or work the thing out at all on a scientific basis.

My part, of course, was that of a rural constable guarding the body until the inspector should arrive from Budeford. I endeavoured to entertain our guests by giving as faithful a rendering of the part as I could, making great play with my own importance, not letting them confuse the footprints till the inspector had examined them, refusing to allow them too near the body in case they destroyed some valuable

clue, and generally portraying a bumptious, ignorant bully of a man thrust by chance into a position of authority and importance. I thought secretly that my impersonation was really, in the circumstances, not without merit, but I have to record (and I will do so without comment) that our guests seemed to laugh a good deal more heartily at the uncouth antics with which Eric favoured us from time to time than at my own small efforts. Eric had now apparently discovered, among other uncouth movements, a way of humping himself up in the middle with a most ridiculous effect rather like the mode of progression of a caterpillar. I do not know whether the onlookers took it for a burlesque of a dying man's spasms, or just objectless buffoonery, but they certainly appeared to find it highly entertaining.

This scene lasted perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. Then, still according to John's regulations and to my own relief, a move was made at last in the direction of the house. This meant that Eric was no longer required by the game to enact the rôle of the corpse, though I had still to be at hand in case any of the detectives wished to question me further.

I must now be careful to write down very exactly what happened after we left the glade, for we now come to the point in the affair when individual testimony tends to become confusing - with, to me at any rate, possibly disastrous results. I have been given to understand, in the most brutal way, that my own account of the next five minutes cannot be relied on. I will, therefore, with what grace I can in such circumstances, endeavour to limit my account only to facts which can be corroborated elsewhere.

I told Eric that we were now about to depart, but beyond a final enormous humping of his body he took no notice. A reasonable explanation would be that he preferred not to walk up to the house with me, but would wait until we were all out of the way; that at any rate is the explanation I put forward. In any case, be that as it may, the four of us

certainly did go on ahead: Bradley and Professor Johnson led the way, I stayed behind to give an arm if required to Mrs Fitzwilliam up the path. As I have said, the path here is very steep indeed and Mrs Fitzwilliam found the ascent correspondingly difficult. I advised her to take it easily, citing the well known habit of mountaineers who invariably slacken their pace considerably when going up even a mediocre rise. The consequence was that before we had gone many yards the two men in front of us were out of sight on the many windings of the path. On such small points, as the reader will see, a man's life may perhaps depend.

We had gone perhaps fifty yards along the path, though its windings made our direct distance above the glade (hidden now by the intervening undergrowth) not more than a quarter of that figure, when I observed to Mrs Fitzwilliam that my shoelace was undone. I may say frankly at once that my shoelace was not undone at all; my remark was a subterfuge. Mrs Fitzwilliam was much out of breath. In any case the result was that she was able to sit down for a moment on the bank at the side of the path while I stooped down a few paces away in pretence of doing up my lace. While I was thus engaged we both heard the unmistakable sound of a shot somewhere in the woods below, and quite near.

I do not think that I betrayed much interest. Shots were common enough in that neighbourhood.

Mrs Fitzwilliam, however, seemed startled. 'What was that?' she exclaimed.

I explained. 'These woods are full of rabbits,' I added reassuringly. 'One hears stray shots at any time.'

'But that sounded so close. Surely it might be dangerous?'

'I don't think so,' I said with a slight smile. 'Sound is very deceptive in these woods. Besides, one does not fire without

due precaution.'

I hate the idea of shooting rabbits; they look so horribly like babies when they're skinned,' sighed Mrs Fitzwilliam, with feminine irrelevance. 'Do you shoot, Mr Pinkerton?'

'No, I do not. My eyesight unfortunately renders it hardly possible.' This was the excuse I invariably gave for not shooting, and it served me well enough; the truth is that I do not care for the idea of taking wild life in any form - a sentiment which would doubtless be heartily derided by 'sportsmen' of the Eric Scott-Davies type.

I observed that Mrs Fitzwilliam's alarm was by no means allayed, and I therefore offered to go down again and endeavour to find and warn the marksman.

'But it would be dangerous,' she protested.

'I think I could manage to face that amount of danger, Mrs Fitzwilliam,' I smiled.

'But he might mistake you for a rabbit.'

I looked at her sharply, but it was evident that she was alluding merely to the rustling in the undergrowth. 'In any case I left some articles down there which I should be glad of an opportunity to retrieve,' I was able to assure her, quite truthfully. 'If you would wait here I shall not be more than a minute or two.' And I hurried back along the path.

And now comes the crux.

As to what took place during the next few minutes I am in something of a quandary. The police quite patently disbelieve my own account of them. To give that account to the reader might smack of tainted evidence. I prefer, almost in self-defence, to keep within the close bounds indicated above and state only what is beyond dispute.

I had been down there, then, perhaps two minutes, perhaps three, pretending for Mrs Fitzwilliam's benefit to be searching for the unknown firer and giving one or two hails,



when I heard a second shot. It seemed to come from the farther side of the glade where the performance had taken place and to be much more distant than the last, though I could not be sure; as I had said, sound is extremely deceptive in these thick woods.

I will admit frankly that I was startled by this second shot. I would not go so far as to say that I was alarmed, but I did think, very decidedly, that the firer, whoever he was, should be discovered and headed off. In fact exactly what I had suggested in pretence now seemed to me of considerable importance. I therefore struck off at an angle, passed through the glade in question (Eric was no longer there), and called again in the direction whence I had imagined the shot to come. I called at least three times, but there was no answer; so after waiting perhaps half a minute longer, I retraced my steps, hastily picked up the odds and ends I had come down to retrieve, and made my way up the path again to the spot where I had left Mrs Fitzwilliam, I had been away from her altogether about six or seven minutes. (The reader will forgive the meticulous detail in which I have had to set down the most trivial incidents of this momentous afternoon; its importance will very shortly be only too obvious.)

Mrs Fitzwilliam was not there.

That in itself may not seem of high importance either, but I can assure the reader that it is; for after wavering for a moment in unusual indecision I did not follow her up along the path but went down again to the level of the stream. For one thing the rifle was, so far as I knew, still lying in the glade and it had occurred to me that John might not be best pleased if it were left on the grass like that, clue or no clue. In any case, down I went. And as ill luck would have it I did not go directly to the large glade but, prompted by an impulse which I had grave cause afterwards to regret, turned to the right instead of the left at the bottom of the

path and entered a smaller clearing. This latter, I should explain, ran alongside of the larger one and was connected with it by a narrow path perhaps fifteen yards along. Like all paths in those woods it had two or three turns in it, so that an uninterrupted view from one open space to the other could not be obtained. Except for the path, dense thicket separated the two clearings. A similar track, but narrower and overgrown here and there by brambles, led from the foot of the path up the hill to another part of this small clearing, and it was along this that I went now. I might mention here that I had discovered this little glade myself only a few days ago and had been exquisitely delighted with it; from the state of the two tracks leading into it, it was plain that the place was hardly ever used except by cattle, and I had noted it as an ideal spot should I ever be seeking solitude.

At this particular moment, however, solitude was not the portion it had to offer me. I was not its only tenant. Lying sprawled on his face on the very path on which I stood was Eric Scott-Davies.

I stood stock still, staring at him. His position was unnatural, with one arm doubled awkwardly underneath him. The patch of red lead showed up plainly on his coat, but now it was without doubt larger. On the ground behind him something gleamed as a ray of sunshine, finding its way somehow through the leaves, struck directly upon it. It was a rifle barrel. The fellow was dead: I knew that.

What does an ordinary man – and whatever opinion the reader may have formed on me, I would not myself claim any other title – what does an ordinary man do when confronted suddenly with a dead body? Probably not one of the things he should. Probably something that he definitely should not. I know what I did the next minute. I turned on my heel and blundered (yes, positively blundered!) back the way I had come. What to do? I cannot say. But it was right

into the arms of John Hillyard that I blundered at the end of the track.

He was just about to mount the path up the hillside, and greeted me ordinarily enough. 'Hullo, Cyril, where in the world did you spring from? Well, we'd better be getting up and - Hullo, why, what's the matter, man? You look as if you'd seen a ghost.'

I know I had gone as white as a counterpane and that my knees were literally knocking together, but I put as good a face on it as I could. 'Eric,' I said, with what calmness I could muster. 'In there. I'm afraid he's dead.'

John gaped at me. 'What? Where?' But he was off down the track before I could answer.

I followed him.

He bent over Eric, touching him gingerly and feeling for his heart.

'You're right,' he said abruptly as he straightened up again. 'My God! We mustn't touch him. It - Good God, look at the rifle. It's - it's the very scene, over again.'

'I know,' I nodded, and I have to confess that I could speak only with difficulty; my mouth had gone quite dry.

'Good God!' muttered John again, vacantly. 'Poor chap. And - I say, look, Pinkerton, there's a bit of bramble right across the trigger. Why, it's incredible, after our whole idea *turned* on that very danger. He *can't* have been such a perfect damned fool!'

I said nothing. We stared at the body.

'Well - I suppose I must get on the telephone to the police,' said John heavily at last. 'And a doctor. But - good heavens, Cyril, I *can't* believe it.'

Neither could I, though I did not find it so necessary to say so.

‘Better make a note of the time,’ John muttered, glancing at his watch. ‘3:45, exactly.’

We climbed the hill in silence.

## **chapter six**

The news brought by John and myself naturally threw the party into consternation. Not collectively, for everyone was not already at the house when we reached it; only Ethel, Mrs Fitzwilliam, Professor Johnson, and Bradley were there. Ethel, I learned, had remained alone in the drawing room ever since giving the mock alarm, the professor and Bradley had arrived shortly after passing out of the sight of Mrs Fitzwilliam and myself, and Mrs Fitzwilliam, who had followed my advice and taken the ascent very much more easily, just before ourselves.

The period of waiting for the doctor and the police was the most awkward I had ever experienced. Neither John nor I had offered the faintest hint that the tragedy was due to anything but accident, but without doubt the ominous word 'murder' was in everybody's mind; I know that it certainly was in mine. To my fancy we had already begun to eye each other askance, as we sat, almost in silence, together in the drawing room. Was indeed one of our number a murderer – and if so, who? That was the terrible question which seemed to be looking out of everyone's eyes.

The news was broken privately to the other members of the party, Miss Verity, the De Ravels, and Armored, as they arrived in turn. Elsa, poor child, collapsed completely; Ethel took her up to her room, and we did not see her again that day. The others joined us in the drawing room: Armored, very white and obviously shaken, but with dry eyes, perhaps ten minutes after our own arrival, and then the De Ravels together – Mrs de Ravel sweeping in with compressed lips

and frowning brow like a tragedy queen fighting an overwhelming shock, dramatizing as usual for our benefit her perfectly genuine emotions. Indeed I am not sure that she was not actually (if unconsciously) enacting the rôle of murderess! I noticed that she did not sit next to her husband although he beckoned to her, but on the other side of the room; he carried the chair over which he had already taken for himself, and joined her there.

As for Armorel, she had made straight for the small settee where I was and sat down beside me, giving me a wavering smile as she did so; I pressed her hand in silence, and she clung to it as if desperately, holding it all the time we remained there. I can only hope it helped her; I know that it gave me a curious comfort during those most uneasy minutes. Even at such a time I was able to reflect what an astonishing person Armorel was, at one moment quite crushingly sophisticated, at another almost childlike. Were all young women like that? I wondered. No, for certainly Elsa Verity was not; she never darted from one extreme to the other. Yet was not variety the spice of feminine attraction? An odd thought. In what strange and uncontrolled ways one's mind works.

But my thoughts could not stray for more than a few seconds from the situation that faced us all. As I looked round the silent circle it gave me a cynical interest to reflect that, out of the round half-dozen persons, apart from the servants, who would be left in the house when the novelists had gone, two had openly expressed to me their wish for Eric's death and at least two more might be considered also to have an adequate motive for killing him - three more indeed, I thought still more cynically, if I included myself. If one is to believe the detective stories a person with a motive for murder is invariably innocent of the crime, and the larger the motive the more certain his innocence. On that basis most of the party were already ruled out from

suspicion. Yet I could not believe that detective stories are always quite so true to life as they should be.

The tension in the drawing room was increased rather than diminished with the arrival of the police. We did not see them then. John met them at the door, and they went down at once to look at the body, with the doctor they had brought with them. Ethel came in to tell us that a message had been left that no one was to leave the house until the superintendent had seen us all.

Morton Harrogate Bradley whistled. 'A superintendent, Mrs Hillyard, eh? How many men did he bring with him?'

'Oh, I think three, besides Dr Samson,' Ethel answered, a little distractedly. 'Two constables in uniform, and another man in ordinary clothes.'

'A detective sergeant,' Bradley muttered. 'Taking no chances, evidently.'

It was a plain reference to the question that was in all our minds.

Ethel excused herself, and after a moment Bradley strolled out of the room too.

He came back in a minute or two. 'There's a constable on duty outside the house,' he informed us. 'To see nobody leaves it, I suppose. By Jove, this looks like a serious business.'

One could not fail to agree with him.

He seated himself beside Mrs Fitzwilliam. 'I've never seen the police at work before,' he said languidly. 'Ought to be most interesting.'

It was a remark perhaps not in the best of taste, and Mrs Fitzwilliam laughed nervously. 'I've no wish to in the least. I - I prefer to invent this sort of thing.'

'I remember when I was a young man at Dublin University,' observed Professor Johnson, and embarked on a

long anecdote. The conversation gradually became general.

‘I suppose the superintendent will want to question each of us,’ observed De Ravel. ‘Going to be rather awkward, isn’t it?’

‘Why?’ asked someone.

‘Well, I mean, that damned play we were doing. We were all in different places, you see. Just as we were meant to be.’ Was it my imagination that he slightly stressed the last sentence?

‘Just as we were meant to be,’ echoed Sylvia de Ravel, in deep tones. ‘No, I’m afraid that nobody will have witnessed the – accident.’ Her pause was calculated and produced its effect. Her husband looked at her nervously; we all looked at each other nervously.

Then, as if by silent agreement, everyone began talking at once.

Under cover of the babel Armored’s clasp on my hand tightened, and she whispered: ‘Pinkie, I’m frightened. I’m terrified. What – what do you think the police will do?’ She stared at me with widened eyes.

I did my best to reassure her, and asked if she would prefer to let me take her somewhere else away from the others, but she said she would rather remain.

To my astonishment tea was served precisely at half-past four. There was really no need for astonishment, I suppose, but the humdrum things of life seemed so unnatural in face of one of its catastrophes. When everything is upside down, anything right side up must appear misplaced.

In actual fact the tea did us good. Ethel behind the teapot looked so normal, and what is more behaved so normally, that our jangled nerves began to rearrange themselves. It was scarcely a shock when John appeared at the door and



announced that the superintendent would like to see Professor Johnson, in the study.

‘Why Professor Johnson first?’ asked De Ravel of no one in particular, as the door closed.

‘Independent witness,’ replied Bradley. ‘Didn’t know the deceased. Close at hand when it happened. Facts first, before fancies. I shall be the next, then Mrs Fitzwilliam.’

‘But I did know him,’ Mrs Fitzwilliam said, hesitatingly.

‘Yes, but I don’t expect he’s aware of it.’

‘Do you think,’ Mrs Fitzwilliam asked, still more haltingly and with a nervous glance round, ‘do you think it would be better if I – didn’t mention I knew him? Of course it was only very slightly, and – well, I mean, there’s no need for me to be mixed up in it more than necessary, is there?’ She looked round again as if appealing to us to support her. Her earlier vivacious manner had quite disappeared since the tragedy.

‘I think,’ Ethel said gently, ‘we ought all to tell the exact truth, don’t you?’

‘Yes, but if he doesn’t ask me that?’ Mrs Fitzwilliam persisted.

‘It would be better, perhaps, just to mention it.’

Mrs Fitzwilliam gave a rather forced smile. ‘Yes, of course. I should have done so really, in any case.’

John came back into the room.

‘The superintendent’s seeing everyone alone, of course,’ he said, as he took a cup of tea from Ethel.

‘You’ve been with him a long time,’ remarked De Ravel. ‘At least it seemed like a damned long time. What’s been happening?’

‘Oh, I’ve just given him the facts, so far as I knew them. It took some time to make him disentangle what we were pretending to do from what actually did happen.’

‘I expect he’s got it firmly fixed in his head that Pinkie shot him with a ball cartridge instead of a blank one,’ sniggered De Ravel.

‘That is just what I’ve been wondering,’ I said, rather uneasily. ‘But I looked. It was undoubtedly a blank cartridge in the breech. I examined it carefully.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said John. ‘There’s no doubt about that.’

‘But when I saw him lying there, that undoubtedly was my first thought,’ I said, as indeed it had been.

‘But you said he was in a different place, John,’ said Ethel.

‘After all, he couldn’t have got there, Cyril, could he, in that case?’

‘I thought he might somehow have struggled there, if he had been only unconscious at first,’ I muttered.

‘Oh, well, that’s out of the question,’ said John, rather impatiently. ‘He was playing the fool right up to the last. No, it must have happened after you people had left him, of course.’

‘Where *was* he shot, John?’ asked Mrs de Ravel, breaking her moody silence.

‘Right through the heart, the doctor thinks, from the back.’

I think we all started at that. ‘Exactly where you’d said?’ Mrs de Ravel murmured.

‘Exactly,’ John replied shortly. ‘In fact, right through that dab of red stuff on his coat.’

‘Ah!’ Mrs de Ravel breathed. She crouched back in her chair, and fixed her green-flecked eyes on me.

I felt extremely uncomfortable. Did the woman really suspect me of having shot Eric in sober earnest?

But the general feeling, though nobody expressed it, was terribly plain: somebody *had* taken advantage of our little

play and its arrangements to turn it from a farce into a tragedy. Who?

'Who *was* it shooting in the wood?' asked Mrs Fitzwilliam suddenly, with an air of desperation. I was sure that the question had been trembling on her lips all the time, and only good taste had prevented it from being put. Now she could restrain it no longer.

I was relieved to hear it, too. It had been in my mind ever since I heard the second shot, but I too had not cared to put the query. Its implications were so obvious. Moreover, the way all reference to the matter had been so carefully avoided was in itself significant.

John, however, looked merely mildly surprised. 'I fired down there,' he said.

'You?'

'Yes. I thought I'd complicate things a bit by firing a shot in the air while you were still in the neighbourhood.'

'Complicate things? Oh, I see; the play, yes. But there were two shots.'

'Were there?' said John, puzzled. 'I never heard the second.'

'I did. Didn't you, Mr Pinkerton? You were down there looking for the firer at the time.'

'Yes,' I nodded. 'I heard it.'

'So did we,' put in Bradley. 'The first one fairly loud, and the second much fainter. But after all,' he drawled, 'there must have been two shots, mustn't there? One that you fired in the air, Hillyard, and one that killed Scott-Davies.'

'Yes, of course,' John agreed. 'How stupid of me.' But he still looked puzzled.

There was a little silence, while all of us tried to work out this matter of two shots.

‘I suppose the police have a pretty good idea of what must have happened?’ resumed De Ravel. ‘I mean, Eric must have picked up the gun, taken it along with him and loaded it, and then - ’

‘No,’ said John. ‘That’s rather a curious thing. It wasn’t the same gun. The other was still lying where we left it.’

‘Another gun?’ I said, in a surprised voice.

‘Yes. And by the way, that completely wipes out the possibility of a blunder, because we looked at the one you’d used, Cyril, and it had obviously fired a blank cartridge. There’s no confusing a rifle barrel after blank and after ball.’

‘Ah,’ I said relievedly.

‘But where did the other gun come from, John?’ asked Ethel. ‘Who took it down there?’

‘That,’ said John in grave tones, ‘is precisely what the police will want to know.’

There was another little pause.

‘What about fingerprints on it?’ asked Bradley.

‘The sergeant examined it roughly while we were down there. He couldn’t give a definite opinion on the spot, but he seemed to think that all the prints were made by one set of hands. He seemed to think, too,’ John added, in a perfectly expressionless voice, ‘that the hands would almost certainly be Scott-Davies’.’ There was no need for him to add that that meant nothing at all. It had been actually a point in our own play.

Professor Johnson came back, saying that the superintendent would like to speak to Mr Bradley. ‘I thought as much,’ Bradley murmured with positive satisfaction, as he went out of the room.

Everyone wanted to ask the professor questions, and Armorel clasped my hand still more tightly as he told what had happened. Except to take her tea, and so forth, the poor

girl had not loosed it at all. Nor had she uttered a word, beyond mechanical replies to such kindly questions as were put to her by Ethel. Her agitation rather surprised me. Could it be that her wild words of the morning had been the result only of a feminine *crise des nerfs*, that she had never meant anything of what she had said, and now that her wishes had been so swiftly fulfilled she was overcome with grief? Yet I could not believe that she had been fond of her cousin. Both rumour and her entire behaviour denied it. But naturally it would be a shock to any girl to lose so suddenly the playfellow of her childish days; that, no doubt, was all that was the matter; she would soon get over that.

I gave her hand a small squeeze, and she rewarded the action with a smile so grateful, so utterly unlike the Armored I had thought I knew, so almost humble, that I experienced quite an emotion.

Professor Johnson had little to tell us. He had been asked only such questions as might have been expected. I gathered, from the way he phrased his replies, that the superintendent had dropped no hint of any dissatisfaction with the theory of accident. I could only hope that was so. I had no wish at all to be mixed up with a murder trial.

Bradley's prophecy had been remarkably correct. After himself Mrs Fitzwilliam was summoned. She was rather longer away, and when she came back she told us that she had been questioned about the two shots. She and I had of course been the nearest to the scene of Eric's death at the time.

I, however, was not summoned next, but Armored. She went off literally trembling with fear, and I was more concerned for her than I can say. Indeed, so obviously upset was she that Ethel absolutely insisted on accompanying her into the study and remaining there during the interview, which the superintendent kindly made as short as possible.

Our three guests were now preparing to go, the superintendent having told them that so long as they left their addresses and could be reached instantly in case of necessity, there was no need for them to remain. John got out the car to take them to the station and I think that none of them was at all sorry to leave.

De Ravel was interviewed after Armored, and then Mrs de Ravel; still no summons came for me. At last I was called, last of all of us. Elsa of course was in no fit state to be questioned at all.

My first impression of Superintendent Hancock was of an intelligent, capable officer. It would be anticipating to say here that my impression was a grievously mistaken one.

It was with little apprehension that I gave the superintendent a small bow and sat down in the chair he indicated. Indeed I had been wishing to be called sooner, as I fancied I might be able to help the investigation to some small extent. The extreme danger in which sheer, malignant chance had placed me had not even occurred to my mind.

‘Mr Cyril Pinkerton, isn’t it?’ began the superintendent, in quite friendly tones. ‘I’m sorry to have to trouble you, sir, but there are just one or two things I should like to hear from you. By the way, what is your profession?’

‘I have none,’ I smiled. ‘Hobbies, yes, but no profession. I am fortunate enough to have a small private income.

Nothing large, you understand, but quite enough to enable me to live on in moderate comfort.’

‘You live in London, I understand.’

‘Yes. I have a small service flat in Kensington Square. No. 27, Cromwell Mansions.’

‘Thank you, sir. And your age is?’

‘Thirty-six.’

‘And unmarried?’

‘Certainly.’

‘I see. Now, you knew the deceased, Mr Scott-Davies, very well, I believe, did you not, Mr Pinkerton?’

‘Not very well, by any means. Not even well. We were the merest acquaintances.’

‘Yes? Well, now, sir, I should like you to give me in your own words an account of what has happened here this afternoon, to *your* knowledge; never mind about anything to which you can’t speak at first hand.’

‘Certainly, Superintendent,’ I said, and gave as succinct a résumé of the afternoon’s events as I could.

‘Thank you, sir. That seems quite straightforward. Now Mr Hillyard has already told me that he himself loaded the gun that you used this afternoon in your play-acting, and of which I understand you were the firer, with a blank cartridge which he prepared for the purpose himself. Did you examine that cartridge before you actually fired the gun?’

‘I did, Superintendent. I was brought up as a boy never to point firearms at anyone, even if they were unloaded, so that it was almost instinctive to make certain at the last minute that there had been no mistake. It was certainly a blank cartridge. And as a matter of fact I did not point it at Mr Scott-Davies at all, but over his left shoulder.’

‘I see. Now, I suppose you’re used to handling firearms, Mr Pinkerton? I mean, you do a good bit of shooting, one way and another?’

‘I never shoot, no. I have an objection to taking wild life, and in any case I am, as you see, short-sighted.’

‘Yes. Then in your opinion we can rule out any possibility of the accident having occurred during your play-acting?’

‘Well, I should imagine so,’ I said dryly. ‘He was certainly alive during the rest of our scene. Everyone can confirm

that. As Mr Hillyard remarked, he was playing the fool to the last.'

'Exactly,' nodded the superintendent. 'He was, in fact, in his usual good spirits?'

'Very much so. More. He had just become engaged, only this morning.'

'So I understand. Poor young lady. Bound to be a terrible shock. Now I want to clear up the matter of these two shots, Mr Pinkerton. You heard the first, you say, when you were going up the path through the wood with Mrs Fitzwilliam?'

'Yes. It seemed to alarm her, so I offered to go down and warn whoever was firing that it was not safe for a moment or two. Then, while I was still looking, I heard Mr Hillyard fire the second shot, as no doubt he told you.'

The superintendent looked at me in a manner which I found rather odd. 'Now why do you say that, sir?' he asked.

'Say what?'

'That you heard Mr Hillyard fire the *second* shot?'

'Because I did,' I said in surprised tones.

'And how do you know it was the second shot that Mr Hillyard fired?' the superintendent positively hurled at me. 'Why couldn't it have been the first?'

I stared at him. The point had actually never occurred to me.

'I'm only asking for information, Mr Pinkerton,' said the superintendent, more normally.

'Well, if you put it like that,' I had to say, 'I don't *know*. I took it for granted.'

'But why?' he persisted. 'You must have had some reason. Try to think if you please, sir.'

'Is the point important?'

'Quite,' he said shortly.



I thought hard, but it was impossible for me to say why I had been so certain that it was the second shot which John fired, except perhaps that it was the less loud of the two. I had to intimate as much.

‘Then try to describe the two shots that you heard, will you? For instance, they didn’t both sound alike?’

‘Oh, no. Certainly not. The first, as I say, was a good deal louder. And nearer. The second seemed to be some little distance away. Let me see, now, so far as I can remember I fancied that the second came from the upstream direction, but I couldn’t possibly say how far.’

‘I see. You say, sir, that the first sounded to you louder than the second. Can you add anything to that?’

‘No,’ I replied, in some perplexity. ‘I don’t think I can.’

The superintendent was playing idly with a pencil on the table before which he sat. By the door stood the man we supposed to be the detective sergeant, taking no part in the conversation.

‘Well, sir, put it like this. Different guns make different sounds, don’t they? Would I be right in gathering, from what you tell me, that the first shot sounded more like a shotgun than a rifle? The sort of hollow sound that a small-bore shotgun makes?’

‘Yes,’ I said carelessly. ‘Something like that, I suppose. But now I remember, the second shot – ’ I broke off, for I noticed that the superintendent and his sergeant were exchanging a significant look. ‘What was that about a shotgun?’ I asked sharply.

‘Why,’ said the superintendent blandly, ‘Mr Hillyard tells us that he fired with a 20-bore shotgun. What you tell us seems to establish that his was the first shot.’

‘But I couldn’t possibly swear to anything of the sort,’ I protested, annoyed both with the superintendent for laying

this silly trap and myself for falling into it. 'I told you, the second one was too far away for me even to make a guess at the type of gun.'

'Yes, quite so,' the superintendent said smoothly. 'Of course. Now will you tell me in a little more detail, Mr Pinkerton, just exactly what you did from the time you left Mrs Fitzwilliam to the time you encountered Mr Hillyard?'

I began to feel a little uneasy. This was a direct request that I should 'account for my movements', and the phrase had an ominous ring. And how can one plausibly tell a professionally suspicious policeman that one had simply stood about, to allay the fears of a lady?

'Well,' I said, 'I went down to the glade where we had performed our little scene, and looked for the person who had fired. I fancy I called once or twice. I was about to return, when I heard the second shot. I will not say I was alarmed, but I did feel more seriously that the firer should be warned that people were about. I can say definitely (I remember more clearly now) that this shot did come from the upstream direction. I called again and penetrated some little distance into the undergrowth, still calling. Then, as I got no answer, I went back again, stopped for a moment in the glade to pick up a few things I had left there, such as a cigarette case and matches, and went back up the path to rejoin Mrs Fitzwilliam. She had gone on, and after a moment's hesitation I went down the path again, and - '

'One moment, sir. Why did you do that? Why did you not follow Mrs Fitzwilliam back to the house?'

'Because I had just remembered seeing the rifle lying in the glade as we had left it.' I explained a little testily. 'Mr Scott-Davies must have forgotten to take it with him. I knew Mr Hillyard would not like one of his rifles left on the grass.'

'But you did nothing of the sort?'

‘No. As it happens, I didn’t. That is to say, I didn’t take the direct path into the glade. I turned into a smaller track, which leads into the glade but through another clearing.’

‘And why did you do that, sir?’

I was becoming exasperated. What use was it to attempt to say to a country policeman that the little clearing was beautiful, and I have a liking for beauty? ‘Just for variety,’ I said instead. ‘It was only a few steps farther, and so far as I knew there was no hurry. Then I saw Mr Scott-Davies lying across the path, and turned back at once for help.’

‘I see. Did you examine the body before you turned back?’

‘No.’

‘Now why not, Mr Pinkerton?’

‘Well,’ I said lamely, ‘I know nothing of such matters, and –’

‘But so far as you knew he might not have been dead?’

‘Exactly,’ I retorted. ‘And therefore I thought there was no time to waste before going for competent assistance.’

The superintendent was still fiddling with his pencil, and it was beginning to annoy me. ‘I see. Now I wonder if you can help us in any way to find out how that second rifle got down to the wood. Mr Hillyard tells me that he has three. 22 rifles. He is certain they were all in the rack in here last night, because he examined one before he went to bed with a view to making the blank cartridge the next morning. The third as you see is still here. Mr Hillyard is not sure, but he thinks that one has been missing since first thing this morning. That would be the one which was lying by the body. Now can you throw any light on how it got there?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t,’ I replied, perhaps somewhat stiffly. ‘None at all.’

‘Well, can you put forward any suggestion for us to work on?’

I considered. 'The only thing I can suggest, is that Mr Scott-Davies took it out this morning (he usually did take a gun of some kind with him), left it down in the woods and forgot it, remembered it after we had finished our acting and retrieved it. And I might add the further suggestion that though he remembered the gun, he did not remember that he had left it loaded; and that is how the accident occurred.'

The superintendent made a note on the piece of paper before him as he condescended to compliment me. 'That's a very helpful suggestion indeed. Thank you, sir. That would be quite possible. In fact, we might very well find that that's what actually did occur. Eh, Sergeant Berry?'

'Very ingenious, sir,' said the sergeant, opening his mouth for the first time.

'Well, I think that's all, Mr Pinkerton. In your opinion, then, it was the first shot which killed Mr Scott-Davies?'

'There can't be a doubt of it,' I said firmly. 'I must have been within thirty or forty yards of his body when the second shot was fired. Or fifty at the outside. I can tell you quite definitely that that shot did not kill him.'

'Thank you, sir. I think we shall find what you've told us most helpful,' said the superintendent, rising. 'Would you be good enough to ask Mr Hillyard if he would come in here for a moment?'

I found John in the hall, speaking to one of the maids, and delivered this message.

'Oh, look here, Cyril,' he said, 'Mary tells me there's a damned reporter here already. Get rid of him for me, will you? Don't tell him any facts; the police will give out what they want later. Just say how upset we all are, and - '

'I think I know what to say and what not to say,' I interrupted this homily, with a slight smile.

The man kept me longer than I intended, and the police were on the verge of departure when I got back into the house. The body had been brought up by the two constables, and the ambulance had arrived. The superintendent, the sergeant, and one constable got into it; the other constable was not in sight. I glanced at my watch. It was past seven o'clock.

The others had disappeared, and I was just preparing to go up to dress when John came into the house from seeing the police off.

'Oh, Cyril, come into the study for a moment, will you?' he said quietly.

I did so. As a matter of fact I wanted to ask him about something which had just occurred to me.

'This is a bad business, John,' I remarked.

'Damned bad,' John replied moodily.

'By the way, why are the police taking the body away? Surely they don't do that in a case of accident?'

'No,' John said shortly. 'They don't.'

'Ah!' I said, and waited.

John poured out two drinks of whisky in silence and gave me one. I was not sorry to receive it. I had just discovered that I was feeling very limp.

'Yes, it's a bad business,' John resumed. 'About as bad as it can be. The police aren't satisfied that it *is* an accident.'

'And suicide is obviously out of the question,' I said gravely. 'They do suspect murder, then?'

'Yes. They were bound to. They don't rule accident out by any means; I think their minds are still quite open; but they're taking no chances. They've left a man on guard down in the woods, to keep people off till they've examined the ground again tomorrow, and I've given an undertaking that none of us will leave the district till the superintendent

gives permission. That means you'll all have to stay on here; so if you want to make any arrangements - '

'Oh, I'm quite free,' I told him.

John was fiddling awkwardly with his glass, and did not speak for a minute or two. When he did so I was surprised to notice that he was quite embarrassed.

'I'm bound to say it *looks* like murder,' he burst out at last.

'I shall try to keep an open mind.'

'And if it is,' John pursued, disregarding my remark, 'somebody shot Eric.'

'Undoubtedly,' I agreed.

'It's the matter of those two shots. I'd back you up that it was the second one I fired if I possibly could (the superintendent gave me an idea of what you told him), but honestly I can't. I simply never heard another shot at all, before or after mine.'

'Well, does it matter so much?' I asked, rather impatiently. To tell the truth, I was tired of hearing about those two shots.

John looked more red and embarrassed than ever. 'Look here, Cyril,' he blurted out, 'it's a rotten thing to have to say, but I'm sure you ought to get hold of your solicitor. I don't think the police are altogether satisfied with what you told them.'

## **chapter seven**

As I dressed for dinner that evening I endeavoured to consider, with all possible calmness, the implications of John's revelation.

To say that I was thunderstruck by it would perhaps, in the circumstances, be an exaggeration; Sylvia de Ravel's attitude in the drawing room had showed me that such a gross misconception could at any rate exist; but that the police should make such a grotesque blunder was certainly the last thing I had ever expected. Yet how could I deal with it? I could do nothing, except reiterate the plain truth that it was a blunder, that the five or six minutes I had spent alone down in the wood after leaving Mrs Fitzwilliam had not been expended in shooting Eric Scott-Davies, that they had disastrously got hold of altogether the wrong end of the stick. I could merely wait helplessly and trust that some such evidence would, most improbably, arise to bear me out.

John had acquainted me with a few other facts before we went upstairs, but none of them offered any help. The doctor could not of course name the time of death to the minute; all that he had been able to say was that it had been quite recent and must have taken place within an hour previous to his examination of the body. The bullet had penetrated the back exactly opposite the heart; assuming that the rifle had been more or less level with the wound, as it would have been in the case of the firer holding it against his shoulder in an erect position in the normal way, the bullet would have passed almost straight through the centre

of the heart; that of course could not be definitely ascertained until the postmortem, but assuming it to have been the case, death would have been almost instantaneous. There had been no blackening from the powder on the clothes.

The inferences from these facts were as obvious to me as to anyone. I considered them as I tied my tie, with hands which I was pleased to notice showed not the slightest unsteadiness. The doctor, I had gathered from John, while unwilling to commit himself definitely yet to the presumption that the bullet actually had penetrated the heart, had been able from the appearances to express such a strong opinion to that effect that the assumption was reasonable. In that case the police must know that Scott-Davies had been standing up when shot (with his back of course towards his assailant), that the firer had not been crouching in ambush in the undergrowth (though he might of course have been concealed in an erect position), and that the muzzle of the rifle could not have been less than, no doubt, five feet from Scott-Davies' back when it was fired. Carefully though I examined these points, I could find in them nothing of the slightest assistance to myself.

Another matter had been touched upon by John. There had been found no mark of exit of the bullet, which meant that it was still embedded in the body. The post-mortem would establish its exact position, and it seemed that this was of considerable importance, as showing the degree of penetration. That is to say, if it had penetrated as far as could be expected with a charge of that strength, the inference would be that the range must have been correspondingly long. As soon as the exact place of lodgment was known, the police would take expert opinion on the point with a view to ascertaining as closely as possible the precise range from which the bullet had been fired.



There perhaps I could discern a ray of hope. If by any fortunate chance the experts decided that the bullet must have been fired at a moderately long range, there would be a very definite point in my favour; for with the known fact that I did not shoot, and my shortness of sight, it would be highly improbable (a) that I should ever have deliberately attempted to shoot at such a distance with intent to kill, (b) that I should have succeeded in hitting so small a mark as the vital spot opposite the heart, had I done so. On the other hand it had not needed John to point out that should it turn out that the range had been short, the inference would be that Scott-Davies had been shot by someone so well known to him that he had kept his back turned as the two progressed in single file along the path, which would be yet another point against myself; had it been someone not well known to him Scott-Davies, of course, as staying in the house, would have been following the other, not preceding him.

And yet, I thought to myself now, that did not really hold water, for the assailant might, as I had considered just now, have been standing up concealed in the thick undergrowth waiting to shoot Scott-Davies just after he passed. Was that a point worth putting to the police? Surely any point that tended to help me was worth that. I considered it further. In that case the firer would have had to be stationed where the path made a twist, and on the outer edge of such a twist, so as to get a full view of Scott-Davies' back instead of a slanting one as would have been the case had he stood beside a straight portion of the path. Well, that was possible enough. The path was full of twists, and the undergrowth was quite thick enough for concealment. But then how, in this case, was the assailant to have known at all that Scott-Davies was going to pass along that particular and quite unlikely path?

My mind grew unwontedly confused. I could not decide whether it was better to speak to the police or not. My instinct was to speak, to make strenuous efforts to free myself from this appalling predicament; but might I only make matters worse by doing so? Would it not be better to leave well enough alone, and rely on the police themselves discarding their fatal theory? For the life of me I did not know what to do. One thing only I had decided, almost without reflection: I would *not* adopt John's suggestion and get in touch with my solicitor. For one thing he would almost certainly institute investigations on my behalf, and endeavour to take control of affairs out of my own hands; and in that case other people's real motives for getting rid of Scott-Davies, as well as my own supposed ones, would without doubt be brought to light. That, for the moment at any rate, I would not have. I might be in a highly perilous position, but I would not free myself from it by throwing suspicion on others. I claim no credit in this resolve for chivalry or high-mindedness. It was a matter merely of fair play (and had I not already earned the title of 'sportsman'?). Whoever had killed Scott-Davies deserved the thanks, not the execration, of his fellows. Of that I still had no doubt at all.

Although by now fully dressed, in the maelstrom of my whirling thoughts I had dropped into a chair in my bedroom instead of going at once downstairs, listening automatically for the dinner bell. I should hardly get another chance of being alone until bedtime, and I wished to reduce my incoherent ideas into something resembling order while the opportunity still held. I was not in any sort of panic, I should like to make it clear, though I certainly was alarmed; but I was puzzled, confused, and very doubtful of what to do for the best.

There was the sound of heavy footsteps outside the door, a rap, and John Hillyard came in. He carried a large glass

filled with some kind of liquid. Like myself, he was already dressed.

‘Just been knocking up a cocktail,’ he said, in rather gruff tones. ‘Do us all good. Thought you’d like a spot up here, eh? Feeling a bit knocked up, I expect.’

‘Thank you, John,’ I said, touched by this small attention, so unlike the normal John Hillyard. The stimulant was indeed by no means unwelcome. The whisky I had already drunk might have been water for all the effect it had had.

John hovered for a moment while I sipped the generous allowance he had brought me. He seemed ill-at-ease.

‘Look here, Cyril,’ he blurted out at last, ‘I didn’t say anything downstairs, but you understand. I’ll see you through this somehow.’

‘See me through it?’ I echoed, somewhat surprised.

‘Yes. And – and I’d like to say, Cyril, I think it was – Look here, are you in love with Elsa?’

My surprise changed to astonishment, but I answered this remarkable question frankly enough. ‘No, I’m not.’

‘You don’t want to marry her yourself?’ John persisted, in what in other circumstances would have been incredibly bad taste; now, however, questions of taste no longer seemed to arise.

‘I do not, John.’

‘Ethel and I would use – well, any influence we’ve got if you did,’ John said, almost wistfully.

‘I assure you, my dear John, I have not the faintest intention of asking Miss Verity to do me any such honour.’

John looked at me for a moment in a peculiar way. ‘Well, then, I think it was damned fine of you,’ he said, more gruffly than ever. ‘Damn it, I wouldn’t have believed it. You’ve got more guts than I have, Cyril. I swear I’ll see you through somehow.’

And while I was still staring at him in amazement, he had gone abruptly out of the room.

It was not until the door had closed behind him that I realized that John had actually been thanking me for shooting Eric Scott-Davies!

But my shocks were not yet over. The bell rang downstairs and, hastily consuming the rest of my drink (for which I felt considerably better already), I rose from my chair. But before I could reach the door it had opened in front of me and Ethel was inside the room.

She wore a dark blue dress of some soft stuff and looked exceedingly handsome, as she always does in the evening. But I had no time to admire her looks; her actions were occupying all my attention. She stood for a few seconds leaning back against the door, her arms slightly raised from her sides, looking at me so intently that I began to feel most uncomfortable.

‘Oh, *Cyril*,’ she breathed, scarcely above a whisper. I have mentioned before that if dear Ethel has a fault it is a tendency at times to be a trifle dramatic.

‘Yes, Ethel?’ I said, in as matter-of-fact tones as I could produce. ‘You wanted to – er – see me about something?’

For answer she walked slowly towards me, while I stood uncertain whether to retreat or not, put her hands on my shoulders and, gazing for an instant with the same intentness into my face, solemnly kissed me. ‘Thank you, dear friend, thank you,’ she said, in a low, vibrant voice.

I stared after her as she walked slowly from the room, my mouth positively agape. My hostess as well as my host had come to thank me for shooting one of their guests. A pretty condition of affairs, indeed!

I went down to dinner in a state of greater confusion than ever.

Conversation during the meal was naturally most constrained. Either it was non-existent, till everyone began to feel in the highest degree uncomfortable, or else all spoke feverishly at once. Only Mrs de Ravel and John Hillyard appeared almost completely their usual selves. Armorel spoke scarcely at all. I noticed, however, that the colour had come back into her face, and she looked considerably more composed. Miss Verity of course did not appear.

I did my best to appear at ease while the meal was in progress, but in reality I was feeling anything but that. Recent events might have distorted my imagination, but it did seem to me as if everyone was determined so resolutely to behave quite naturally towards me that the effect was entirely unnatural. Everyone, that is, except De Ravel. He appeared to be going out of his way to make me the target of his barbed innuendos, which at times carried such bitterness that he might almost have had a grudge against me for being under suspicion. I could not make the man out.

Fortunately after the ladies left us he quickly muttered some excuse and went out of the room, leaving John and myself alone together. I wanted to have a few words with John. I was now feeling considerably more collected, and a number of obvious questions had occurred to me which I had been too upset before to put.

‘You said before dinner, John,’ I remarked quite calmly, pouring myself out a second glass of port with a perfectly steady hand, ‘that you had reason to believe that the police were not altogether satisfied with what I told them. I really can’t understand why. I told them merely the plain truth. In what direction does their lack of satisfaction lie?’

John fiddled with his tie in an embarrassed movement. ‘Look here, Cyril, I may have put the wind up you quite unnecessarily. Damned silly of me. The truth was, the idea had just been a bit of a shock to me, and I wanted to pass

the warning on straight away. I think now I may have passed it on a bit too strongly. The superintendent never actually *said* anything of the sort. It was only my impression.'

'I see. And you think now your impression may have been a mistaken one?'

'No,' said John reluctantly. 'Not altogether. But I do think it may have been an exaggerated one. I'll tell you exactly what gave it me. After he'd seen you he had me in again, you remember, and I'm quite sure it was for the sole purpose of checking up what you'd told him; and I'm equally sure there were a good many large questions still left in his mind after he'd finished with me. He asked me a lot of questions about your relations with Eric, too, which I thought rather a bad sign.'

'What did you tell him?'

'Oh, I said you hardly knew each other.'

'Miss Verity's name was not mentioned?' I asked, taking the bull by the horns.

'Certainly not, by me. In fact,' said John awkwardly, 'I intend to pass the word round to the others to say nothing about her and - and you.'

In proportion as John's embarrassment grew, my own singular calmness increased. I noted the fact with interest.

'Perhaps it would be as well. You know perfectly well why I displayed a public interest in Miss Verity. It was on Ethel's express request. I think in fairness to myself something of that should be explained to the others. If the police got to hear of it they would leap to the obvious conclusion, and it might be extremely difficult to rid them of it afterwards.'

'I'll do that of course,' John muttered. 'God knows we owe you that, at least.'

'John,' I said curiously, 'do you really believe I shot Scott-Davies? Quite frankly?'

But John would not answer frankly. 'Not if you say you didn't, of course,' he wriggled.

'Would it really be the least use to tell you I didn't?'

John suddenly grinned. 'Well, whether you did or whether you didn't, Cyril, I don't know if you've noticed that I've brought up a bottle of the '87 this evening. I won't say anything about cause or effect; I just mention the fact. And I'll drink another glass with you on the strength of it. Your very good health, Cyril Pinkerton!' An unusually jocular speech for John.

But I had not quite finished with him yet. I had one last question to ask. 'Well, tell me this instead, John: are you so - really, there's no other word for it - are you so *delighted* that Scott-Davies is dead?'

John at once looked his usual serious self. 'Look here, Cyril, I'm not a sentimental man. I don't subscribe to this modern mush about sanctity of human life. The ancients knew better than that. The only human life they considered sacred was the life that was valuable to the community; and when it was more valuable to the community that even such life should be sacrificed on its behalf rather than preserved, they didn't go maundering about and around the point; they promptly claimed it. Well, if our modern sentimentalists can find anything sacred in the life of a seducer, a waster, and a professional adulterer, I can't. There are some men, and women too (very few, I admit, but some), whom it ought to be reckoned justifiable homicide to shoot at sight, and Scott-Davies was one of them. I don't propose to descend to the conventional hypocrisy of pretending to have the faintest regret that a life that was not merely valueless but a positive menace to the community has been ended. Yes, Cyril, certainly, if you want to hear me say it, I'm *delighted* that Scott-Davies is dead.'

‘Really, John,’ I said lightly, for he was looking so intensely serious, ‘I never knew you had the interests of the community so much at heart. You must be a Socialist in disguise.’

He relaxed a little. ‘Of course I am. I’m a hidebound Conservative, which means I’m more of a practical Socialist than all the theoretical ones put together. Finished your port? Well, suppose we go into the other room.’

But though John passed through the hall into the drawing room, I was not destined to reach that sanctuary just yet. De Ravel was hovering in the hall. He came towards us as we emerged from the drawing room.

‘Pinkerton, can I have a word with you?’

‘Certainly,’ I replied, not without surprise. ‘What is it?’

‘Come out into the garden a minute.’

I saw John hesitate by the drawing-room door, but nodded to him to go on. I did not care at all for De Ravel’s peremptory tone, but it was better to hear what he wished to say. I followed him out of doors.

It was a fine evening, by no means yet dark, and I had no difficulty in seeing De Ravel striding impetuously ahead of me down the path, impatience in every line of him. I could not imagine what he wished to say.

He waited for me in the lane in front of the house, and I must say I was reminded strongly of that evening which seemed so long ago but which was in reality exactly forty-eight hours old, when Eric Scott-Davies had done much the same thing.

Eric’s disciple came to the point with promptitude. ‘Look here, Pinkerton,’ he said, in a thick, unpleasant voice, his little black moustache positively brisling with hostility. ‘Look here, I want to know what the devil you mean by sticking your nose into my affairs and doing my jobs for me?’



‘Mr dear De Ravel,’ I could only protest in amazement, ‘I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.’

‘Don’t “dear De Ravel” me,’ he almost snarled. ‘And don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean. Since my wife saw fit to make a public exhibition of herself this morning I shouldn’t have thought there was much doubt left on that particular point.’

I made a gesture of disgusted protest, but he swept it furiously aside. His face was mottled with passion, and for the moment he was nothing but Latin. All decent reticence, breeding, and civilized manners had to give way to the emotion which he was allowing to master him.

He thrust his face close to mine. ‘What the hell do *you* mean by shooting the swine? That was my job. What’d it got to do with you? My God, I – ’ He literally choked.

I put the best face I could on the unpleasant scene, and I admit that I very nearly lost my own temper too. I told him shortly that his suggestion was offensive, to say nothing of mistaken, and I preferred to hear nothing further of his private affairs.

I spoke sharply, and it seemed to calm him a little. He stared at me for a moment, breathing heavily, and then uttered a short laugh. ‘Oh, very well, you didn’t shoot him then. It was an accident, and you just happened to be standing near. But look here, Pinkerton, what you’ve done you’ve done, and you can dam’ well take the consequences. You needn’t expect any help from *me*. Oh, you needn’t look so alarmed; I’m not going out of my way to give you away or anything like that; one still has a code, even if a damned interfering busybody won’t let one take care of one’s own honour. But you’ll get no help – if I’m here to give it.’ And he swung off, seething, down the lane alone.

I looked after him in perturbation. He was in a dangerous mood. And he was not such a numskull as I had imagined.

He had seen the truth that morning, and – almost superhumanly, it must have been – concealed his terrible knowledge under his usual demeanour of cynical trifling. And he had been intending himself to kill Scott-Davies. He had been saved from committing murder, and he was not grateful. That he cherished such ridiculous feelings towards myself was of no importance; De Ravel's enmity, hidden or open, could affect me or my affairs not a whit. But was it safe to permit him to associate with his wife while he remained in this mood? Hardly.

I went to the drawing-room window and, succeeding in attracting the attention of John, beckoned him outside, where I acquainted him with the purport of this remarkable interview. John undertook to arrange things so that Mrs de Ravel should be in no danger that night at least. It was something to do with a reshuffling of the bedrooms, and he went indoors again to pass the warning on to Ethel. I lingered in the garden, grateful for the cool air and the solitude.

It had grown dark now, and, leaning against a tree, so absorbed was in my own meditations that the first knowledge I had of being no longer alone was a hand clutching suddenly at mine. I turned about with a violent start, and became aware of Armored's dark green dress at my side.

'Pinkie,' she whispered urgently. 'I had to come and ask you something. Don't be furious. I simply had to.'

'Of course I won't' I said gently.

'Are you,' she gasped, 'are you – you *are* terribly in love with Elsa, aren't you?'

'Really, Armored,' I said stiffly. 'Does that matter?'

'Yes – oh, yes. Of course it does. Can't you see?'

For a moment I thought that the shock had turned the poor girl's brain, and she was suffering from the delusion of

being violently in love with me. But there was nothing of the kind in the face that was turned to me. Anxiety, fear, suspense, desperation even; but insanity, no.

‘No,’ I replied more kindly. ‘I must confess I can’t. Why do you ask such a thing?’

‘Because I must *know*. I must. Please tell me. Pinkie, you are in love with her, aren’t you?’

‘Well, if you must know,’ I replied, puzzled by her apparently desperate anxiety that I should be in love with Miss Verity, ‘no, I am not.’

She shrank back as if I had made a threatening movement. ‘Oh, Pinkie,’ she wailed softly, and fumbled for her handkerchief.

‘My dear girl,’ I said in bewilderment, ‘what is all this about?’

‘Why, because you – you didn’t do it for *her*, then. You did it – because of what I said this morning. Oh, Pinkie, I – I *made* you do it,’

I may perhaps be pardoned for the slight exasperation I showed. ‘Are you accusing me of having shot your cousin, Armorel?’ I said tartly. ‘Because if so let me give you the satisfaction of informing you that I didn’t shoot him on your behalf, or on Miss Verity’s behalf, or on De Ravel’s behalf, or on anyone’s behalf. In fact, I’m sorry to disappoint you and all the others, but I didn’t shoot him at all.’

Armorel looked at me dubiously. ‘You didn’t? Oh! Well, I suppose you’d hardly say so if you had, would you? But – well, it does sound a beastly thing to say, but I’ve got over the shock now, and – and I’m glad. And if you had, I wanted to – to thank you. But as you didn’t...’

Her voice trailed off. She stood looking at me for a moment as if expecting me to say something, but I did not speak. She turned and walked slowly back into the house.

I was considerably more disconcerted than I had shown. Nobody seemed to have the least doubt that I had calmly walked down from Mrs Fitzwilliam's side and shot Eric Scott-Davies. The thing was already an open secret. My denials were calmly put aside. It was intolerable.

A shadow detached itself from the other shadows and came towards me.

'Mr Pinkerton,' said a deep, throbbing voice, 'I heard what you said to Armored. You did not deceive her. Still less did you deceive me. Why did you kill my lover, Mr Pinkerton?'

I admit freely that I simply fled into the house.

## **chapter eight**

I can pass with some brevity over the events of the next day. I myself was not called upon to submit to another questioning by the superintendent, though a number of interviews were held of which the importance to myself will be obvious later. The greater part of the day, however, was occupied by the police in searching for material facts on the scene of the death (I would not, unlike some others, prejudge the issue by describing it as the scene of the 'crime'), instead of for personal fancies among the persons so intimately concerned.

My own urgent instinct was to follow the police down to the clearing by the stream and watch their activities there, even from concealment. I reflected, however, that in the event of my being discovered thus spying on them, the action would be held strongly against me; and my judgment repressed the impulse. Besides, John was to some extent in the confidence of the police and had accompanied them, and I should be able to get a tolerably accurate version of their actions and their discoveries, if any, later from him.

It will be readily understood that my situation now was an exceedingly awkward one. With the exception of Miss Verity, each single member of the party had given me to understand, in unmistakable terms, that he or she had no doubt of my responsibility for Eric's death. It is true that this did not in all cases imply condemnation but rather the reverse, but it was a position which I could not but feel acutely. And yet what could I do? Nothing, so far as I could see, but wait: wait for the police to learn of this general

suspicion, as it seemed to me they inevitably must. And then what would happen? I told myself over and over again what I knew to be perfectly true in fact, that the police would never make an arrest on so grave a charge on mere suspicion alone, that they must have solid evidence to support it, that a presumed motive and opportunity were not enough by themselves, and that in my case for the life of me I could not see how any such evidence could be forthcoming; yet I derived singularly little comfort from such reflections. It was as if I stood trapped on the crumbling edge of a precipice, unable to retreat, yet knowing that the ground beneath my feet must inevitably give way under me sooner or later.

During the morning I endeavoured to distract my gloomy apprehensions by a brisk walk down the valley to the little cove where the stream discharged into the sea, but for once the wild beauty of the scenery failed to grip me. Just beyond the confines of John's land I noticed as I passed a patient angler holding a rod and line over the stream. I am no fisherman myself, but I know the rudiments of the sport and it was evident that this one did not. He did not appear to be dangling a worm, and he was certainly not casting a fly; he was instead sitting on a camp stool on the bank, in full view of any fish there might have been, watching a float, of all things, dancing in the shallows of the swiftly running water; in other words, he was not even attempting to fish a pool!

Dismissing him contemptuously as a foolish summer visitor, completely ignorant of the sport which he was endeavouring to practise, I passed on. About a mile further I sat down for a few minutes in an effort to force myself to admire the view. It was a favourite resting place of mine, and I remembered that the last time I had sat here had been in the company of Elsa Verity. I cannot say I was sorry that she was not here with me now; she alone of the party had not launched that terrible accusation against me, and in her

case it would come loaded with unspeakable tragedy. I could only hope that the monstrous idea had not occurred to her. In the meantime her continued absence was without doubt a relief.

Chancing to glance upstream, I noticed that the ridiculous fisherman had set up his stool right in the bend of the stream where it passed out of my vision, and was industriously fishing in the shallows there with his absurd float. Anxious to avoid the sight of any other human being as one does when one is in trouble (a survival of the animal instinct of our simian ancestors, no doubt, with perhaps an indication that they were not gregarious), I got up and walked round the next bend. As I rounded it I glanced back. The man was hurriedly collecting his impedimenta together.

It did not need any wits I may possess to realize that I was being shadowed. I was 'under observation'.

Well, it could only have been expected. I did not allow the fact to interfere with the need I felt for exercise. I completed my walk to the coast, sat on the shore for a few minutes, covertly glancing at my shadower on the top of the cliff behind me, and returned to the farm for lunch.

After washing my hands in the bathroom it chanced that I found I required a clean handkerchief, and went to my bedroom to obtain one. Orderliness in small details is one of my foibles (if indeed so sensible a habit can be thus termed), and I invariably keep my handkerchiefs and my collars in the same drawer of any chest-of-drawers which I happen to be occupying, the right-hand top one, with the handkerchiefs on the right front corner, my soft collars in the rest of the front of the drawer, and my stiff collars at the back. Pulling open the drawer in question now, I noticed at once a stiff collar right in the front of the drawer; the next instant I noticed that the stack of handkerchiefs, which I invariably keep with their edges parallel with the sides of the drawer, was twisted slightly askew.

For a moment I thought that a careless maid had been tampering with the contents. Then a stab of suspicion shot through me and I hastily examined the contents of the other drawers. There was not a doubt about it: all had been slightly but unmistakably disturbed. My possessions had been searched.

Why a momentary but most acute feeling of alarm, almost of panic, should for an instant have made my knees tremble and my mouth go dry, I am unable to say. I knew perfectly well what I had done and what I had not done, and I knew with my conscious mind that a police search of my possessions could not harm me in the slightest degree; there was naturally nothing for them to find. It was instructive afterwards to note how this conscious knowledge was for an instant utterly swamped in blind fear, and how utterly for a second or two the subconscious, with its inbred terror of falling into the clutches of the police, took possession of me.

A minute later I had pulled myself together, and went down to lunch.

After the meal I made an opportunity to ask John about the morning's news.

It appeared that the superintendent had been trying to trace Eric's path from the glade where we had left him to the spot where his body was found, but without the least success. It had not rained for over a week and the ground was consequently hard. No identifiable footprints could be deciphered, and even the traces I was supposed to have made in dragging Eric from the centre of the glade to the edge were hardly discernible. As for crushed grass and broken fronds of bracken and so on, these were in abundance everywhere, both in the track where Scott-Davies had been lying and also in the other track connecting the two glades, as well as in the smaller glade itself. The superintendent had remarked with disgust that



apparently a herd of cattle might have been through the place, and John had disconcerted him by replying that undoubtedly a herd of cattle *had* been through the place, for they came down to the stream to water and on hot days would spend some time in the shade on its banks, wandering anywhere along them. The superintendent then promptly gave up the search for incriminating traces, and the police had wasted most of their morning. And not only down by the stream, I thought, my mind on my own disarranged drawers.

I should perhaps have said that the earlier part of the morning had been occupied, it seemed, in questioning the house servants, but John did not imagine that anything of importance could have been learned from them. I was not to know till later how exceedingly wrong this assumption proved to be.

‘And De Ravel?’ I asked. ‘Everything all right there?’

John nodded. ‘Apparently, quite. They had separate rooms last night, and of course that’ll continue. But Ethel says there’s nothing to be feared. She had a word, tactfully, with Sylvia last night, and she told Ethel in confidence that they had it out yesterday and that all De Ravel’s anger was directed against Eric, not against Sylvia at all.’

‘That’s strange,’ I suggested.

‘I don’t think so. Remember, Paul’s half Latin, and he has the Latin respect for genuine love. Sylvia told him frankly that she was genuinely in love with Eric, and he promptly forgave her anything she’d done. I should imagine, too, that he felt rather humbled by the shock of discovering that she wasn’t in love with himself, and you know how he puts her on a pedestal; anything she does is *ipso facto* right, even unfaithfulness.’

‘It’s an attitude I can hardly pretend to understand, but no doubt one should not condemn it on that account. But in

that case, if Mrs de Ravel was able to convince him that it was a case of real love, why should his feelings be so strong against Eric? There was no doubt of them last night. The fellow was beside himself with hatred.'

'Ah,' said John, 'because he didn't believe there was any love on Eric's side at all. Just one of his usual conquests. You can imagine how he'd take that, in the case of his goddess. In fact,' added John seriously, 'I shouldn't be at all surprised if Sylvia deliberately told him so, or at any rate gave him the impression. And with full knowledge of what the consequences might be.'

I whistled. 'You realize what you're implying, John? You imply that Mrs de Ravel wilfully incited her husband to commit murder.'

John's serious expression deepened. 'I know. And I wouldn't put it past her. It was after the engagement had been announced, remember; and it's my opinion that Sylvia would have stuck at nothing, absolutely nothing, to prevent Eric walking off with Elsa under her nose. It would have been a mortal blow to her vanity; and with a woman like Sylvia her vanity is sacrosanct.'

I removed my pince-nez and polished them on my handkerchief. I have noticed it as a habit of mine, purely nervous, when I am deliberating an important statement.

'After all of which,' I said slowly, 'Eric is shot.'

John caught the implied question. 'No,' he said quickly. '*During* all of which. This happened after they left you and Eric, to go to the places where they were to wait, and before they returned here. During the time, in fact, when our detectives were supposed to be detecting and when Eric was actually shot.'

The significance of this jumped to my eye. 'Then those two weren't alone?' I exclaimed. 'They were together? They've got a mutual alibi?'

‘They have,’ John agreed gravely. ‘They have. Otherwise –’ There was no need for him to finish the sentence. Otherwise, was his meaning, he might have been more ready to accept my own denial. It was unfortunate.

There was a moment’s silence, while I found it necessary to readjust certain of my ideas.

‘Do the police know this?’ I asked then.

‘I think not. I gather that Paul intends to say nothing about it, in case awkward questions are asked about the reason for their being together. There’s no need, you see, for the scandal to be raked up now; at least, so far as the police are concerned.’

‘Oh, none,’ I said, with perhaps more sarcasm than I should have employed in the circumstances. ‘The police can learn all about my supposed but quite illusory reasons for shooting Scott-Davies, but not about De Ravel’s very real one.’

‘But if De Ravel couldn’t have shot him?’

‘We have only his wife’s word for that,’ I said tartly. It was an observation which, I admit now, I should not have made, but the reader must remember that at that time I was in the desperate position of the drowning man catching at any piece of driftwood.

John put on his most obstinate expression. ‘A word which I, for one, am quite prepared to accept. I’ve been assuming, by the way, Cyril, that you will keep all this to yourself. I’ve been passing on to you a confidence which isn’t my own, simply because I thought you might consider it of importance, in view of your own position.’

‘Certainly,’ I replied stiffly, ‘you need not fear that I will abuse it.’ I did not point out to him that he was ready to accept Mrs de Ravel’s bare word but not mine, which in other circumstances I might have found in the highest degree offensive.

Nor did I trouble to offer my own word again. It seemed in some monstrous way to have become tacitly accepted between us that I was responsible for Scott-Davies' death; and as any further denial would have carried no more weight than before, I found it beneath my dignity to attempt it.

Instead I asked: 'And where were they? At the swimming pool, or - '

'Swimming pool,' John answered laconically. 'Look here, I must go. I promised to see the superintendent after lunch.'

I nodded, thinking rapidly.

I have not yet enumerated the various places in which the other members of our party were supposed to be during the mock murder, and to which they actually (or presumably) retired after Eric Scott-Davies and I had played our scene. In view of what afterwards transpired, the point is an important one and it would be better for me to deal with it at once. The superintendent of course was already in possession of this information.

I have already explained that each of them was to be alone, with the object of being able to produce no confirmation of his or her alibi for the benefit of the would-be detectives; and until a few moments ago I had supposed that, with the change of the mock death to a real one, this humorous predicament had in all cases become a very real one. The allotted places had been as follows: De Ravel was to be at the swimming pool, practising his diving, an accomplishment in which he was unusually proficient; Mrs de Ravel was to be sun-bathing in the enclosure, surrounded by a thick belt of young trees and undergrowth, constructed by John for that purpose on the slope above the swimming pool; Armorel was supposed to be lying, with a book and a rug, on the hillside on the other side of the house, in a rough uncultivated expanse of bracken dotted with furze

overlooking the sea in the distance, known as the Moorland Field; John was to be wandering anywhere in the woods towards the bottom of the valley with a gun, looking for rabbits; Elsa Verity was to be picking bluebells in Bluebell Wood, where Ethel was to have joined her had she not encountered the supposed corpse on the way and given the alarm as I have already described.

To elucidate the position, I have been at pains to draw a rough map of this part of the Minton Deeps land, marking the positions *supposed* to have been occupied (not those which were afterwards proved to have been occupied) at the time when the alleged fatal second shot was fired.<sup>1</sup> It will be seen that, including the house where Ethel was, and excluding John, a rough semicircle is shown round the scene of the tragedy, the diameter of which was not far short of half a mile. The spot I have indicated as John's position is that given by him as the place where he discharged his shotgun in the air.

During the afternoon I may remark briefly that I occupied myself, in an attempt to check profitless brooding and the formation of impossible plans for vindicating myself, with writing the beginning of this manuscript. I found it an admirable mental release from the strain of my situation to reconstruct with impartial exactness the precise events which had led to the shooting of Eric Scott-Davies.

And I might state here that if I have been successful in this attempt, the reader should now, at this stage in the story, be fully aware whose finger pulled the fatal trigger. Such at any rate is the conclusion which I, reading over what I have already written, see rising from the circumstances as I have described them. But I must in fairness admit that I am writing now at some considerable time after the event, and with full knowledge of the identity of Scott-Davies' executioner (I will not use the ugly word

'murderer' in such a worthy case), and that perhaps may have clarified my vision.

Except for a short interval for tea, from which I excused myself as soon as possible, I continued to work on my manuscript without pause until it was time to dress for dinner, rigorously keeping my thoughts from dwelling upon anything but the matter immediately in hand.

John had not appeared at tea, being apparently still busy with the superintendent, so that I had not seen him since our talk together after luncheon. Naturally nothing was said during dinner upon the topic which was filling my mind, but after the women had left us De Ravel, as on the previous evening, excused himself with a quite unnecessarily black glance at me and I was able to learn as much as John knew, of the further progress of the affair.

It was not reassuring. In spite of John's efforts, the police, it seemed, had now learned all about my supposed interest in Elsa, and were disposed to take it very seriously; John had been questioned on it, and though he had done his best to pooh-pooh the notion that my intentions had ever been earnest, the superintendent had shaken his head weightily. The information had come from the maids, whom he had questioned that morning. One does not usually realize how very well posted the kitchen always is in the affairs of the drawing room.

Worse still, the superintendent had ferreted out the incident of the swimming pool. From the maids again he had discovered that my clothes had been wet that night and I had had to change; from Elsa Verity of all people he had extracted the story of what had actually happened. John's manner became more serious than ever as he hinted that the superintendent had fastened gladly on this as a possible motive for my making away with Eric.

As to this interview with Elsa, Ethel had already mentioned at dinner that it had taken place, though I did not attach much importance to it then. John now informed me that the superintendent had insisted on obtaining it, quite politely but with the utmost firmness, or else a doctor's certificate to the effect that Miss Verity was medically unable to grant it. That this was not the case, although she was keeping the girl in bed, Ethel had known quite well, and had therefore been forced to allow it; though she had insisted on being present during the interview, which of course had to take place in Elsa's bedroom. This the superintendent had willingly permitted, with the result that poor Ethel had had to sit silently by and listen to statements highly damaging to myself issuing from the unwitting girl's lips. For after all I could not blame the poor child for falling into the superintendent's specious traps; nor, ignorant that I was under suspicion, could she possibly have realized the purport of her words as she told blushing of the rivalry of Eric and myself for her company that evening and its sequel.

'You think, then,' I asked at length, 'that my position is considerably worsened as a result of the police investigations today?'

'Damn it,' said John unhappily, 'I'm sure of it. It must be. Look here, Cyril, don't be a quixotic fool. Wire for your solicitor tomorrow.'

But I shook my head. That I still would not do. Not indeed that I had the same qualms about the De Ravels' connection with Eric coming out; for though I remained just as anxious that the proof of my own innocence should not depend on the official proof of someone else's guilt, that no longer held in the case of the De Ravels with their mutual alibi. Indeed I should not have objected now to that story becoming known (after all, consideration for other people's moral reputations must give way to consideration for one's own life), if only

that the police might realize that there had been other motives in existence for Eric Scott-Davies' death compared with which my puny ones were as red ink to claret. But somehow or other my own solicitor...no! I could not get rid of the feeling that he might discover not merely what I wanted discovered (which was nothing more than convincing proof that I at any rate had not fired that second mysterious shot which the police had now arbitrarily decided had killed Eric Scott-Davies) but a great deal more as well; and that might turn out to be almost more awkward than before.

In this connection one thing which I learned from John seemed to show that the superintendent was at least keeping his mind open for other possibilities than my own guilt. He had today displayed a much greater interest in the plot of our little play, as outlined by Mrs de Ravel, writing it laboriously down, questioning John on its whys and wherefores, and generally showing that he considered it well worth investigation.

'The man isn't a fool,' John said as he told me this. 'I'm quite certain he smells a rat there.'

'You mean he guesses the situation wasn't quite so imaginary as one might have supposed?'

'Exactly. I had to tell him the details, of course, because he could easily check them up elsewhere; but naturally I didn't let on that there was a hint of truth underlying any of it. But as I say, I'm sure he wasn't convinced.'

'Did you tell him that it was invented by Mrs de Ravel?'

'No,' said John slowly, 'I didn't. I thought it wiser not. I didn't say it wasn't, of course; I just skated round the point. But I did give him a very definite impression that I made it all up myself - and of course I *was* responsible for a good deal of it. Perhaps you'd better back me up there, Cyril, if you get a chance.'



‘Very well,’ I agreed, though I could not quite see the force of the subterfuge.

It was uncomfortable in the circumstances to join the others in the drawing room, but not to have done so would have looked odd. Ethel of course treated me with her normal serene kindness, and so did John; but both the De Ravels looked as if they resented my presence, as I have no doubt they did, and Armored looked positively frightened. I stayed for a wretched half an hour, and then excused myself to return to my manuscript, feeling extremely depressed and worn out.

I had thrown off my coat for greater comfort and been working for perhaps twenty minutes when there was a light tap on my door and immediately following it Armored slipped into the room. I sprang up in some confusion, hastily putting on my coat, but Armored seemed far too agitated to remark my shirt-sleeves.

‘Pinkie,’ she said urgently, ‘I *must* talk to you. Come along to my room.’

‘Really, Armored,’ I had to protest, ‘that would hardly be – h’m – wise, would it? If you will go downstairs, I will follow in a moment or two, and we could take a turn out of doors.’

Armored stared at me in a rather disconcerting way. ‘I simply can’t make you out, Pinkie. Are you worrying about the proprieties? Good heavens, I really believe you are. Well, you beat me, that’s all. How you can shoot a man one minute, and make a fuss the next about – ’

‘Armored!’

‘Anyhow, we can’t take a turn out of doors,’ she hurried on. ‘It isn’t safe. I’ve just looked out, and there’s a very obvious detective hanging about in the lane. Of course he’d follow us and hear every word; it’s nearly dark already. And it isn’t any safer in here. I feel as if the whole house is full of them, in every cupboard and under every bed; one of them

would have his ear glued to the keyhole in two minutes. My room's the only safe place; they won't suspect you're there. Listen - I'll go along now, and you follow in about two minutes. Creep down the passage as quietly as you can, and for heaven's sake don't let anyone see you. Oh, I don't mean any of the others,' she added impatiently, seeing the expression on my face. They don't matter. I mean a *detective*.'

'But, my dear girl, really I don't think it advisable, for your own sake, that - '

'Oh, come *on!* In two minutes.' And before I could protest further she had gone.

I really did not know what to do.

In the end I complied with her wish and, feeling uncomfortably furtive, tiptoed along the passage to knock on her door.

It was whisked open in front of me. 'Come in, you *idiot!*' muttered this surprising young woman. 'Don't stand there banging and telling every policeman within miles where you are.' And catching my arm, she literally jerked me over the threshold. 'There's a chair over there.'

I sat down in the one she indicated, at the foot of the low bed. Armorel locked the door, hung a garment of some kind over the handle, and then seated herself on the bed close to me.

'Pinkie - what are you going to *do?*'

'Do?' I could only echo feebly. 'How do you mean? I don't think I intend to "do" anything.'

She stared at me for a moment, her small, oval face intensely serious beneath its cap of shining dark hair. With a curiously detached interest I noticed tiny pin-points of moisture on her upper lip.

‘Look here, Pinkie,’ she said slowly, ‘we’ve got to have this out. Don’t fence with me. I *know* you shot Eric.’

‘The devil you do!’ I exclaimed involuntarily, surprised for the first time in my life into bad language in the presence of a woman.

‘And if you’re really not in love with Elsa, it must have been because of what I said to you in the morning. The De Ravel business wouldn’t mean anything to you. Do you swear you’re not in love with Elsa, Pinkie? No, don’t look so prunes-and-prisms; answer me: Do you swear that?’

‘I can certainly give you my word of honour that my feelings towards Miss Verity are not of the nature you indicate,’ I replied, striving after my fleeting dignity. To tell the truth I had never been in a feminine sleeping chamber before, and the litter of articles all round, from which I felt it only decent to keep my eyes averted, indicated that Armored certainly did not possess the foible of orderliness in domestic details. My embarrassment was increased by the fact that if I wished to preserve the decencies thus, there was hardly any place in the room on which I could rest my eyes. ‘I have indeed already given you my word, I thought, to that effect. But that does not imply – ’

‘Then it *was* because of what I said,’ Armored interrupted with a little sigh, and continued to look at me with disconcerting intentness.

I shrugged my shoulders in silence. There was no use in making undignified denials. But my feeling of uneasiness deepened. What could be in her mind?

‘I’m not going to be a hypocrite and pretend I’m sorry you did it,’ Armored continued, ‘except for your own sake, Pinkie. It was dear and sweet of you, just as it’s dear and sweet of you to pretend now that you didn’t, to save my feelings. But why you ever thought I was worth it, I can’t imagine. I’m

not. But you've given me Stukeleigh - or rather, the privilege of looking after Stukeleigh, and it's up to me...'

Her voice went on, and in a way I heard what she said. But I suppose the recent strain had been too great for my mind, for I found my attention wandering uncontrollably and the most odd thoughts passing through my brain. It was perhaps one of the most remarkable moments of my life, and yet I found that instead of the closest concentration on the matter in hand my attention to Armored's words was interspersed with the most highly irrelevant reflections:

'...get you out of this ghastly mess...' What an odd word to choose in connection with shooting her cousin, 'sweet'; 'a sweet murder'; how very Armored-like! '...absolutely *bound* to suspect you...' Why *do* they wear such things? '...tumble to it sooner or later...' Quite impractical and no doubt ridiculously expensive. '...simply terrified they may get it out of me...' But pretty; oh, yes, really quite astonishingly pretty. '...of course they'd realize at once...' Lemon-yellow, I suppose. '...anything to stop that, simply anything...' No, I like the mauve ones better. Is it mauve? '... can't give evidence against her husband...' Impractical, yes; but charmingly so. It isn't my idea of a... '...so naturally I'm game...' Those are the stockings she wore last night, with the green dress; I recognize them distinctly; how remarkably different they look off!

'So *would* you, Pinkie?' Armored was saying urgently.

I turned to her with a start. 'I beg your pardon, Armored. Would I what?'

'Why, like to marry me, of course!'

I fear I gaped at her. 'Good gracious me, what did you say?'

'Because a wife can't be called upon to give evidence against - Pinkie! Haven't you heard a word of what I've been saying?'

‘Yes, yes,’ I said hastily, trying to reorient my ideas to the remarkable fact that I must have been receiving a proposal of marriage. ‘Yes, of course, my dear girl. But really...’

I managed somehow to reassure her.

The line I took, in all seriousness to match her own, was that if we married the situation would actually be worse for me than before, because the police would then immediately say that I had killed Eric in order to become master of Stukeleigh. Fortunately Armored quite saw the point, and I was able to escape back to my room.

It was with some humility that I locked myself in alone; humility over the totally erroneous judgment I had once passed upon the dear girl I had just left. I had pronounced her empty-headed, flighty, unbalanced, insincere, and heaven knows what; and now, under the impression that I had killed a man on her behalf, she had been offering quite sincerely to requite me by sharing her life with me, solely so that she could not be put into the witness box against me. And to testify to what? Apparently just to the conversation we had had that morning, for there was nothing else to which she could testify. It was truly a great-hearted offer.

I did not feel like writing any more that night. Instead I put into operation a plan I had formed. I did not wish, now that my possessions were under the scrutiny of the police, to leave my manuscript in my bedroom, for any Constable Tom, Dick, or Harry to pry into. I intended to conceal it, and I thought I knew by what means.

Putting the papers into a stout flat waterproof metal box, which I often took into the country for the purpose of housing specimens of rare mosses (another hobby of mine), I slipped carefully out of the house and made my way in the darkness to the Moorland Field. There I made for a certain gorse bush which I had already noticed by day as having a hollow among its roots, and, having paused a moment or

two to make sure whether I had been followed or not, deposited my box in the cavity.

And so (to quote a phrase from the diary of Samuel Pepys) to bed, if not in my case to sleep.

So far my nerves, unaccustomed though they were to a strain of this nature, had answered to the demands I had put upon them. The next morning they broke.

Questioned for a full two hours by the superintendent, who did not trouble to disguise his hostile intentions, about all the points of suspicion which he had marked against me, about my quarrel with Scott-Davies, about Miss Verity, about my movements in the wood when that fateful second shot was fired, I lost my head; my answers were so confused and contradictory that it was a marvel to me that I was not arrested on the spot.

Released at last I made my way from the house in something (I admit it freely) not unlike panic. I could no longer carry the burden alone; I must have some independent adviser to work for me as the police were working against me.

I still shrank from sending for my solicitor, but a new idea had presented itself. I remembered a man who had been in my house at Fernhurst, who had in fact been of the same term as myself, so that although we had drifted apart as we grew larger, as small boys we had necessarily been thrown much together. This man, I had gathered from reports in the newspapers, had recently obtained some success in unravelling the complications of crimes which had baffled even Scotland Yard. I had not really credited it at the time of reading, for I remembered him as a very ordinary – and indeed somewhat offensive! – small boy, but I was now ready to clutch at any suggestion of help that was offered.

Presuming on our very early acquaintance, I sent a telegram to Roger Sheringham intimating that I was in a

perilous position and asking urgently for his aid.

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<sup>1</sup> See frontispiece.

## **chapter nine**

Sheringham's reply came with admirable promptitude. He would arrive that same evening. I was surprised and agreeably impressed. Sheringham must have changed for the better. I did not remember him as particularly ready to put himself out on anyone else's behalf.

Within half an hour came a second telegram, announcing his train and the time of its arrival in Budeford, with a request to be met there.

I took John aside after lunch and informed him of what I had done. He was good enough to express his eagerness to offer the hospitality of the farm to anyone working on my behalf, but I could see that he did not altogether approve of my action; his fear was obvious that Sheringham might only confirm the conclusions of the police; was I quite sure that my own solicitor would not have been better? I smiled and said that I was sure that Sheringham was a better investigator than any solicitor, and all I wanted was my own innocence proved; Sheringham would do this for me, and, on my request, not seek to prove a case against anyone else. John did not seem altogether convinced, but that I could not help.

Such is the pleasure of even the most self-reliant man in shifting some at least of his burdens onto the shoulders of another, that I was already feeling much calmer when, at six o'clock, I went up to the garage to get out my car for the purpose of driving into Budeford to meet Sheringham. John had seemed so impressed with his skill as a detective (at times even a semi-official one, attached temporarily to



Scotland Yard, I had gathered from John, who seemed to know all about him) that I was confident of his ability to unearth some definite evidence in my favour, and already the lowering horizon about me seemed to have lifted somewhat.

I had reversed out of the garage, and was just beginning to go forward, when a man suddenly appeared out of the hedge on my left and called to me to stop. I obeyed, and he informed me, addressing me by name, that I must not leave the farm premises.

I was not unreasonably annoyed. 'That is ridiculous. I am on my way to meet a friend, by the 6:42 train at Budeford.'

'I'm sorry, sir; those are my orders. The superintendent doesn't wish anyone to leave the place for a day or two, in case he wants to question them in a hurry.'

I asked him who he was and demanded his credentials. He turned somewhat red, and said it didn't matter about credentials; those were the superintendent's orders. I spoke to the man sharply and, disregarding his minatory attitude, drove on. The incident was of no importance, but it served to unsettle me once more. Evidently I was to be allowed very little scope. Not for a moment was I deceived into believing that such restrictions were to apply to anyone but myself. The position was not merely dangerous but humiliating.

It was therefore without surprise that I observed a loiterer outside Budeford station as I drew up there, who followed me, almost without troubling to conceal the fact, onto the platform. The net could not be eluded for long.

I recognized Sheringham instantly, in spite of the many years since I had last seen him. Indeed, he was only too conspicuous. Even in the country I endeavour to preserve the neatness of my attire. It would have pained me considerably had anyone I knew ever surprised me in such a

disreputable pair of flannel trousers as Sheringham was wearing, or such an inconceivably shapeless hat. And he actually must have had the thing on in London. His pockets, too, were bulging with papers, and he had four books bundled under his left arm.

‘Well, well,’ he said, wringing my hand as if genuinely delighted to see me, which I certainly found a warming sensation. ‘And how the devil are you, Tapers?’

In spite of my pleasure in welcoming one whom I was already looking on as my deliverer, I could not help wincing at this odious nickname, which I had thankfully imagined dead and buried these twenty years. For some totally obscure reason I had been hailed, on the very first day I ever set foot in Fernhurst, as ‘Tapeworm’, a highly offensive appellation of quite incomprehensible relevancy; nor had its subsequent abbreviation to ‘Tapers’ ever seemed very much better to me. I remember once my dear mother asking me: ‘But my dear Cyril, *why* do the boys all...’ But that has no bearing on the present situation.

It would, however, have been churlish of me to remonstrate with a man who had come over two hundred miles to do me a service, so I put the best face I could on the thing and replied with a smile, perhaps somewhat forced: ‘At the moment, I’m afraid, rather precariously.’

Sheringham responded with a violent thump behind my left shoulder, which was doubtless intended to be encouraging but succeeded actually in jarring my spine rather painfully. ‘Cheer up, cheer up, you’re not dead yet, you know,’ he said, with brutal good humour. ‘Not even arrested. Where can we get some beer?’

‘Beer?’ I said deprecatingly. There was only just time to get back to Minton Deeps to dress comfortably for dinner, and in any case I do not care at all for beer so shortly before a meal. A light sherry and bitters, perhaps; or even, if the

circumstances warrant it, an inoffensively flavoured cocktail; but *beer*, no.

‘Beer,’ Sheringham repeated firmly. ‘I’ve got a wonderful thirst after that journey. That looks a likely sort of pub over the road. We’ll try it.’

I was forced to accompany him, but I did refuse to let him order beer for me.

‘So it is murder, your little affair down here,’ Sheringham positively beamed at me. ‘I rather gathered it might be. And they suspect you of it, Tapers. Marvellous! Well, here’s luck.’

‘To such an extent,’ I replied dryly, sipping my sherry, ‘that the gentleman on your left, who has just ordered a bitter beer, is here for the express purpose of seeing that I do not bolt by the next train.’ It seemed necessary to impress on Sheringham the real seriousness of the situation, which he had not apparently quite realized.

‘One of the local sleuths?’ said Sheringham, not troubling to moderate his voice as he turned round. ‘Good! We’ll get him to join us.’

I endeavoured to put a stop to any such thing, but before I could speak Sheringham had actually invited the man to bring his glass to our end of the counter. The detective did so, grinning somewhat sheepishly.

Sheringham began to question him with remarkable rapidity.

At first the man hedged in his replies, but Sheringham continued to mention names such as Chief Inspector Moresby, Superintendent Green, and the like, with such familiarity that at last the fellow said, very civilly: ‘Excuse me, sir, you’re not from the Yard yourself, are you?’

‘Me? Oh, no. At least, not at the moment,’ Sheringham replied, with complete composure. ‘That is, I haven’t come

down here officially, but...' He left it to be understood that official instructions might reach him at any moment.

Considerably to my surprise the detective allowed himself to be taken in by this bluff, and spoke freely. He was not on the case himself. He had come to the station in response to a telephone message from Minton.

'To keep an eye on our friend here,' Sheringham said, with a wink in my direction, to which I endeavoured to respond with a smile.

The detective agreed that this was the fact. Sheringham went on to ask him general questions, such as who was in charge of the case, what was the name of the chief constable, and so forth, which the man answered now without hesitation.

'I needn't bother to ask you the details of the case,' Sheringham concluded carelessly. 'I can get those from Superintendent Hancock. Have another drink? No? Well, perhaps we'd better be getting along, Tapers. It's all right,' he added to the man. 'I shall be with Mr Pinkerton now. You needn't bother any more.'

'Very good, sir,' replied the detective. 'Thank you.'

I was amazed. But I did not think Sheringham would have quite such an easy task with the superintendent.

For the credit of the detective force I should add that when we drove off a few minutes later I caught sight in the driving mirror of the man watching us from a doorway until the car disappeared. He had not been taken in quite so thoroughly as he pretended. It was quite a pretty problem to ponder, who had won the game of bluff.

Sheringham chattered incessantly all the way. He would not allow me to put the facts before him, as I was itching to do, on the ridiculous pretext that a man can do only one thing well at a time; and either I should muddle my story, or else have us in the ditch. Without flattering myself I had to

point out that it is a very incompetent driver who cannot drive and speak rationally at the same time; but Sheringham very nearly annoyed me by retorting that until he had had a little more experience of my driving, he would reserve judgment on that point.

I had my revenge, perhaps rather childishly, by asking him what he did with himself in these days besides detecting, though I knew perfectly well that he wrote novels, I had even read one or two. They had not struck me as anything very much out of the ordinary ruck, though I gathered that they enjoyed considerable sales. He replied now, not without prevarication, that he was able to get a bit of journalistic work occasionally.

If I had been able to pretend ignorance of Sheringham's real activities, nobody else thought it worthwhile to do the same. Indeed I was surprised to see our placid Ethel, whom not even a sudden death in our party had been able to throw off her balance, in quite a flutter. I had spoken to no one but John of Sheringham's impending arrival, and he had actually forgotten to mention it until after I had left for Budeford, what with the various anxieties of the moment; so that Ethel had only just had time to get his bedroom ready, whither I led him at once as the others were still dressing. It was the only room vacant, Eric's.

From the conversation in the drawing room before dinner, while we sipped our cocktails, I gathered that Sheringham really was quite a famous author; and I must say, in fairness to him, that bumptious though the impression was that he gave in other ways, over this particular matter he was modesty itself, seeming almost to be ashamed of being an author at all and praising in the most extravagant terms John's detective stories, which I was surprised to learn that he knew intimately. It was then John's turn to pretend to be ashamed of being an author, and so it went on, while we stood humbly by and listened to the two great men. It was a

curiously human little interlude between the acts of our tragedy.

At dinner Sheringham talked away with a volubility nothing short of amazing. Hardly anyone else was able to get a word in at all. I know that several times I cleared my throat preparatory to speaking, which I usually find causes a little anticipatory silence, but Sheringham would scurry in on each occasion before I could even begin. It was occasionally somewhat exasperating.

He also persisted, in spite of my frowns, in calling me by the same unpleasant nickname in front of everyone. Then Armored (on whom, I was sorry to notice, Sheringham seemed to be having a most unfortunate effect, inducing in her all the old characteristics of strident ill-mannerliness which had so grated on me before) must needs scream across the table to know what it meant, and Sheringham actually told the story in full, using terms altogether unsuitable for the dinner table. I joined of course in the ensuing laughter, but I began to doubt whether I had been as wise as I had imagined in summoning the man. Anyone who could remain so insensitive to my wishes and feelings could hardly possess much acumen in any direction.

Yet after dinner, when we had sat for a few minutes over our port and then adjourned with John to the study to rid ourselves of De Ravel, Sheringham seemed to take on quite a different personality. 'Now then,' he said briskly, as soon as we were seated, 'we've got no time to waste, and I know old Tapers has been aching to get it all off his chest, but it's always a mistake to do a thing at the wrong moment. Let's get down to it now. I want the facts first. No, not from you, Tapers. You might give me an unconsciously distorted version. From Hillyard, if he doesn't mind. The outside facts first, to which there's independent evidence; then the inside facts from you, Tapers, for which there's no corroboratory evidence; and finally what both of you think about it all, for

which there'll be neither evidence nor even perhaps reason, and therefore all the more interesting. Anyhow, the facts first. I know most of 'em already, of course, but tell me as if I didn't know a single thing, please.'

I was sorry, for some reason, not to be telling the story myself, but I recognized the justice of what Sheringham said: I might quite possibly distort it. For the rest, he spoke with such confidence and with an air of being so familiar with the procedure on such occasions, that my reliance on him, which had almost vanished as I listened to his foolish talk at dinner, began to return.

John told the narrative well, with no over-emphasis or meiosis. And by prefacing his remarks with the observation that he was going to acquaint Sheringham with precisely what the superintendent knew, or rather, with what John *knew* he knew, he was able to avoid telling the true story behind the false one. In other words, he only told half of what there was to tell. Not even Scott-Davies' relations with Mrs de Ravel were mentioned.

This did not suit me. I had called in Sheringham for the express reason that he, unlike my solicitor, could be told everything.

I held up my hand when John had finished, before Sheringham could put any questions he had already in mind.

'Sheringham, before we go any further I want to say something. I have had no chance yet of explaining why I sent that telegram to you, instead of to my solicitor, as Hillyard here had been pressing me to do. It was for this reason: I want my innocence established, but not at the cost of official cognizance of somebody else's guilt.'

Sheringham looked puzzled. 'Don't quite get you. Say that again.'

‘I am anxious for my innocence to be established,’ I repeated patiently. ‘Indeed, there is nothing for which I could conceive myself more anxious. But that is all. I do *not* wish the police to be provided with proof of anyone else’s guilt. My solicitor, I’m afraid, in his zeal for me might think it his duty to present any such proof, if he could unearth it, to the police. I want you to give me your solemn word not to do the same.’

‘You mean, you don’t want it found out at all who shot the chap?’ Sheringham asked, in undisguised astonishment.

‘No, no. Find out by all means, if you can. But don’t tell the police. Tell the police of nothing at all except any evidence which clears me and inculcates no one else.’

‘But why ever not?’

‘Because,’ I explained, with a glance at John, ‘both Hillyard and myself are privately agreed that the shooting of Scott-Davies was a meritorious act, and whoever did it ought not to suffer for the act, if it can be prevented.’

Sheringham glanced from one to the other of us, and whistled softly. ‘Hullo! Conspiracy to condone a felony, eh? And you want me to join it. Serious matter, Tapers.’

‘I don’t know, Cyril,’ said John, looking slightly uncomfortable, ‘that I went quite so far as that, did I? I said –’

‘You said that you weren’t going to be hypocrite enough to pretend to regret his death,’ I interrupted. ‘Come, John. You implied the rest. Have the courage to say it straight out.’

John hesitated for a moment. Then he looked at Sheringham. ‘It’s quite true. I did imply it, and I do think it. Scott-Davies was a blackguard, and half a hundred people are going to be happier for his death. I think it would be a shame for anyone to suffer for it.’



‘Well, that’s all right,’ Sheringham said, quite unperturbed. ‘We three are more capable of judging that than twelve wooden-headed country bumpkins. I’ve not the least objection to our constituting ourselves a highly unofficial jury. But you must let me have your evidence of his blackguardism. I must be allowed to judge for myself.’

‘And it’s precisely that which I absolutely refuse to divulge to you unless I have your promise not to communicate to the police any proof you may discover of another person’s guilt,’ I replied firmly.

Sheringham looked at me quizzically. ‘Dear me, Tapers; the tapeworm turning with a vengeance,’ he said coarsely. ‘So you won’t give me your evidence without my promise, and I won’t give you my promise without the evidence. This looks uncommonly like a deadlock, doesn’t it?’ He looked at us both, but neither of us answered him. ‘Has this evidence of Scott-Davies’ blackguardism any bearing on the actual crime – assuming of course that it is murder?’

‘Possibly,’ said John.

‘Perhaps vitally,’ I amended.

‘And is it in possession of the police?’

‘No,’ John replied.

‘Or at any rate, only in vague outline,’ I added. ‘Though of course they must have some idea of his general character. Inquiries are certain to have been made in London, I take it. The usual gossip will be at their disposal.’

John rubbed his chin. ‘Yes, that’s true enough. I’d overlooked that. And if they *have* got hold of the gossip – ’

I nodded. Obviously if they had got hold of the gossip, the dead man’s relations with Mrs de Ravel, already guessed by them, must have been definitely established.

‘That was a very bare outline you gave me just now,’ Sheringham remarked to John, more thoughtfully. ‘Am I to

take it that this evidence at which you're hinting fills that out?'

'Considerably,' John admitted.

'In fact,' I put the case bluntly, 'instead of my being the only person with an apparent motive for killing the man, it shows mine as the weakest of the lot and gives a far stronger one to almost everyone in this house, including even John here.'

John gave quite a start. 'By Jove, you're perfectly right, Cyril,' he said, in such obvious surprise that one would have gathered that so plain a fact had never been apparent to him before.

Then I must hear it,' said Sheringham with decision. 'Now look here, we'll arrange a compromise. I'll agree that, if I'm satisfied Scott-Davies was as bad as you paint him, I'll confine my communications to the police (always supposing I find anything to communicate) to facts and theories in support only of Tapers' innocence. But if I'm not satisfied, I use my own discretion. Do you accept that?'

We looked at each other.

'Then the final decision will rest with you,' John pointed out. 'In actual fact it will cease to be a jury even of three.

There'll be a judge only, not even a jury. You're taking a great responsibility, Sheringham.'

'I'm not afraid of responsibility. I consider myself the equal, in intelligence and sound common sense, of any properly constituted jury.' Whatever Sheringham may lack, it is not self-confidence.

'I'm inclined to agree, in that case,' John said, glancing at me.

'I accept,' I assented.

We paused a moment, and then simultaneously shifted our positions as if we had just taken an important decision

and were now free to go ahead with the next thing.

‘Half a minute, though,’ Sheringham remarked. ‘There’s a “but”, you know, and a big one too. Supposing, what may very easily arise, that the proof of Tapers’ innocence *is* the proof of someone else’s guilt?’

‘Then it must be suppressed,’ I said promptly.

‘Humph!’ Sheringham scratched his head frankly. ‘Well, put it this way: suppose the *theory* of your innocence is the *theory* of someone else’s guilt?’

I considered this. ‘No, I don’t mind that, so long as there’s no proof.’

‘Even a little evidence, to support the theory?’

‘I’m not sure about that,’ I hesitated.

‘Don’t be a fool, Cyril,’ said John abruptly. He turned to Sheringham. ‘We don’t even know that the police consider they’ve any proof of Pinkerton’s guilt at all. At least, enough to justify his arrest. If they do, then the main thing is to produce proof of his innocence, even if that does involve some evidence against another person – so long (if Cyril maintains this quixotic attitude) as this rebutting evidence doesn’t constitute actual *proof* of another person’s guilt. Put a theory forward of anyone else’s guilt by all means. The police keep that sort of thing to themselves, and the police don’t blackmail. If it’s a choice between police suspicions merely and Cyril’s liberty, then let the police suspect as much as they like – so long as they can’t *prove*. That meets your case, Cyril, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I considered. ‘Yes, I think I can agree to that.’

‘Well, it’s your neck, Tapers,’ observed Sheringham, with misplaced joviality. ‘Very well, now we all know where we are. Hillyard, you’d better take up the tale again and fill in all those gaps.’

‘We must tell him everything now,’ I remarked to John. ‘Even what you told me in confidence about that mutual alibi.’

John nodded.

‘Good heavens, yes,’ Sheringham said, crushing out the butt of his cigar and pulling a pipe from his pocket. ‘I should think so. You’ve got to tell me every tiniest detail now. First Hillyard, and then you, Tapers, and then we’ll discuss it till past midnight. That’ll be enough for today, and tomorrow we’ll go forth and seek what we may find – and incidentally try to put a temporary stop on any idea the superintendent may have of clapping old Tapers into jail. Now, then.’

It was crudely expressed, but the sentiment was admirable. I found myself warming again towards Sheringham. At any rate his complete confidence was exceedingly heartening.

So much so that I found courage to put into words a secret terror which I had hitherto kept to myself.

The inquest on Scott-Davies had been fixed for the next morning at eleven o’clock. My apprehension was that the police would put forward such a strong case against me (and how strong their case might be I had no idea) as to cause the jury to return a verdict of wilful murder against me, in which case I should be immediately arrested. My desperate anxiety was to avoid arrest until the tide had turned definitely in my favour, and I said as much to Sheringham now.

To my concern he took a grave view of the possibility. ‘If they’re confident,’ he said, ‘it’s quite on the cards. If they’re not, they’ll probably arrange for the inquest to be adjourned, to give them time to look for more evidence. But you must be prepared for it, Tapers, I’m afraid.’

I must confess I pressed him strongly to do his utmost to unearth something in my favour before the inquest opened,

short though the time was. As I pointed out, it would add considerably to my tribulation to be compelled to await events from the inside of a prison cell rather than outside it. I can assure the reader, who may consider my urgency a trifle undignified, that should he ever be faced with the likelihood of incarceration in a prison cell, and can almost see the door as it were opening to receive him, there are few stones, and even boulders, that he will leave unturned to delay the event.

‘I’ll have a talk with the superintendent, of course,’ sheringham said dubiously, ‘though I doubt if I shall get very much out of him. Anyhow, that’s on the knees of the gods, and if they do jail you for a bit, Tapers, I promise you I’ll have you out again in double-quick time, if it’s humanly possible.’

I smiled wryly.

We went on to discuss the whole thing in detail.

It was well past midnight when we separated to our bedrooms, and by that time Sheringham knew quite as much about the case as John did, and very nearly as much as I did myself. For I, of course, knew more about it than John. I knew, for instance, that I had not fired that second shot.

## **chapter ten**

The next morning I was early astir, in the hope that Sheringham would be the same. Indeed I had already completed my toilet before half-past seven, and was wondering what to do next, when my door opened and Sheringham walked into the room in his dressing gown.

‘Hullo, Tapers. Up already, are you? I was going to pull you out of bed, to show me the lie of the land.’

‘I was thinking of something like that myself,’ I agreed. ‘We have at least an hour before breakfast.’

‘Right. Well, I won’t keep you ten minutes. And I may say,’ Sheringham added with a grin as he passed out of the room, ‘that it’s the biggest compliment you’ve ever had in your life, getting me up at this unearthly hour. I haven’t done such a dismal thing for ten years.’

I nodded and smiled, though privately I did not consider Sheringham’s insistence on the favours he was doing me, real though they might be, in altogether good taste.

He disappeared into the bathroom, leaving my door open behind him, so that I had to shut it myself. I detest an open door in any room which I happen to be occupying.

It was not much over the stipulated time when Sheringham, again without any attempt to knock though he knew this time that I was not in bed, strolled into my room once more. I rose from my chair and we went down together.

‘Let’s go and have a look at the scene of your crime first,’ he said.

We went out of the house and down the hillside. When we were halfway down I glanced back and noticed a man strolling after us. A sudden panic shook me that he might somehow be about to forbid our investigations, though I knew perfectly well that such a thing was almost impossible. The incident serves to show the deplorable state to which my nervous system had been reduced.

I pointed out to Sheringham the exact place where the body had been lying and its position, and he stood for some minutes contemplating the scene in silence.

'I see,' he said at last. 'And your theory is that he was shot by someone concealed in this undergrowth, at *that* bend in the path. At least, that's the only one where a straight shot could be got.'

'Not my theory,' I said quickly. I had of course mentioned that idea of mine in our conversation last night. 'Only a possible explanation.'

'Have you looked for any traces?'

'No, I haven't been here at all since.'

Sheringham turned back to the detective, who was watching us from the bottom of the path. Hitherto he had taken no notice of the man, and I did not know that he had even seen him.

'I suppose your people have searched all this ground thoroughly?' he called back, in affable tones.

'Yes, sir; the superintendent went over it himself, and Sergeant Berry too,' the man replied, advancing towards us. I noticed with surprise that he spoke respectfully and did not seem to resent our presence in the least. 'I'm afraid you won't find anything here, Mr Sheringham. According to Mr Hillyard, his bullocks have been over it a time or two.'

'Ah, you know me, do you?' said Sheringham, and even in my anxiety I was able to smile at the childlike satisfaction

with which he had heard himself addressed by name. 'How's that?'

'Well, sir, what with your telegrams yesterday, and one thing and another,' the detective grinned. 'And the superintendent said you could have a look round if you wanted to, and I was to stand by to tell you anything you wanted to know about the position of the body and suchlike.'

'And to report to him if I found anything interesting, eh?' Sheringham grinned back. 'Well, that's very kind of the superintendent, and I'll tell him so when I see him. By the way, are there any places you don't want trodden on, or anything like that?'

'No, sir. We've finished down here now. You can go where you like.'

'And what did you find?' Sheringham asked bluntly.

The man hesitated. 'Well, not much, sir, and that's a fact.'

'And if you had, you wouldn't say, eh? Well, well. Anyhow, there doesn't seem much here. I suppose the smaller glade you were talking about lies at the end of this path, Tapers?' he added to me.

I must admit I winced. It was bad enough that Sheringham should have resuscitated this offensive nickname at all, without using it in the presence of... 'Yes,' I said shortly.

We moved forward into the smaller glade, and there again Sheringham stood stock still, just looking round him.

'Yes, I see. And that track on the left leads to the main clearing, I suppose? What's the theory? That Scott-Davies came from the main clearing to this one by *that* path, passed through the clearing, and was going along the path we came in by to the foot of the main track up the hill, when someone shot him from behind? Is that the idea?'



‘We don’t know yet that it wasn’t accident, sir,’ said the man cautiously. ‘We’re not prepared to say it was murder at all.’

‘Oh, assuming it was. Murder’s much more interesting,’ returned Sheringham ghoulishly. ‘Would that be the idea?’

‘Something like that, if it was murder, no doubt.’

‘In other words, the murderer was on *this* side of him – between him and this clearing. What about the other way round: that Scott-Davies was on his way into this clearing along the other path, and someone shot him from that direction?’

‘The head was pointing towards the slope, sir; the feet were in this direction.’

‘He might have spun round when he was hit.’

‘And the rifle was on this side too, behind him. There were no signs of anyone having got past him to lay it this side. I’m assuming it was murder, as you said.’

‘Yes, quite. But I thought you said cattle had been all over the place?’

‘Not down that path, they don’t seem to have been. You can see for yourself it’s not much more than a foot wide, and there’s no broken twigs and crushed brambles like there is everywhere else. Though the ground was too hard to take any prints.’

‘Yes, the other path’s bigger, certainly. But if cattle got into this place they must have got out again, and I don’t suppose they wandered in and out by the same path. I don’t know much about cattle, but that doesn’t somehow sound like them.’

‘No, they came through it all right. There’s another path on the farther side, bigger than the one where the body was found. You can’t see it from where we’re standing. It’s over there, behind that bush.’

We went over to look at it. I myself had not perceived this third track when I had been in the glade before, its entrance being masked by the bush in question so that one turned an abrupt corner to reach it.

I was hoping that some important development might arise from this hitherto unsuspected path, but Sheringham did not appear to find anything significant in it. He looked at it, walked a few steps along it, and then rejoined us.

‘Well?’ I asked anxiously. ‘Does anything occur to you so far?’

‘Yes,’ he said promptly, ‘something certainly does. What the devil did Scott-Davies want to come through here at all for? He must have been making for the track up the hill, because the path he was on leads nowhere else, but it was an unnecessarily long way round from where he was. What did you people make of that?’

‘Well,’ confessed the detective, ‘I don’t know that we bothered about it much, sir. One does sometimes go a longer way round, doesn’t one? Especially when it’s a matter of only a few steps. It didn’t seem important.’

‘I don’t say it is, for a moment. It’s only a point of oddness.’

‘Well, for that matter it was a point of oddness that Mr Pinkerton should have gone along that path too,’ remarked the man, not, I felt, altogether without malice.

To my discomfiture Sheringham immediately agreed with him, with quite unnecessary emphasis. ‘Yes, it certainly was. What on earth *did* make you go along that path, Tapers?’

‘I don’t know, but I can assure you I’ve regretted it ever since,’ I replied bitterly. Though no doubt it was simple enough. I was looking for someone who was firing shots, you remember. No doubt the subconscious idea in my mind was that I had better look in this little glade as well as

elsewhere, and I turned aside from the main path to do so. I cannot imagine what else it can have been.'

'Yes, that's feasible enough,' Sheringham at once agreed, to my relief. 'Well, let's go and have a look at the other glade. You and Mrs Fitzwilliam were the last to see Scott-Davies alive, Tapers, I gather. I'd like you to show me exactly where he was. We might be able to figure something out from that.'

I led the way into the other glade and showed Sheringham where Scott-Davies had been lying during our mock drama. He examined the ground very carefully, though what he was looking for I could not imagine, but all traces had quite disappeared. It was impossible to see even where I myself had been standing. The ground here was bare, being on the fringe of a wood of large trees, and there was no bracken or even coarse grass to receive and retain impressions.

I sat down on a tree stump, watching our companion's investigations with interest as he trotted eagerly about and even ran up the path by which we had descended a short time before, peering down among the trees at us. He even went so far as to get the detective to impersonate Scott-Davies lying there, so that he could ascertain from how high up the path he was visible.

'I can see him from right up here, Tapers,' he called down to me. He was standing at just about the place on the path where I had sat down to rest on the afternoon of the tragedy and watch Ethel pretending to discover the body, so that I knew that a perfectly good view could still be obtained from there of that particular portion of the glade. 'Didn't you notice him?'

'I didn't personally,' I called up. 'I'm quite sure I never looked back once. Whether Mrs Fitzwilliam did, I can't say; but I don't imagine so.'

Sheringham came down again, shaking his head reprovingly. 'That's a pity, that's a great pity. You don't know when he got up, then?'

'No, I haven't the faintest idea.'

'So we don't know which direction he took first of all. – No, don't get up for a moment,' he added to the detective. 'I just want to see how visible you are from those other paths.'

He disappeared along the path into the smaller glade, where I could hear him occasionally rustling the undergrowth.

'All right,' he said, as he came back three or four minutes later. 'I can see you from one or two places, but not many. I don't think there's much in that, anyhow. How's the time, by the way? Good heavens, it's half-past eight. Well, I don't think we can do much more here, Tapers, and I'm about ready for my breakfast. What about it?'

'Certainly,' I acquiesced, though disappointed (however unreasonably) that nothing seemed to have eventuated from my companion's activities.

We began to ascend the hill.

'Oh, by the way,' Sheringham called down to the detective, 'what time is Superintendent Hancock likely to get here?'

'I fancy he said he'd be here soon after nine, sir.'

'Good! I want a word with him.'

We climbed in silence through the wood and emerged into the field above. When we were halfway across it Sheringham turned to me with a grin.

'Well, Tapers, I congratulate you.'

'On what?' I asked, startled.

'On that pretty little theory of yours. You say you haven't tested it?'

‘What theory? Oh, about someone concealed by the path. No, certainly, I haven’t.’

‘Well, it was a smart piece of work, my boy. You were perfectly right.’

I stared at him. ‘I was – *right*? How?’ I had not had the faintest hope of there being anything in my idea at all. It seemed impossible that there could have been.

‘Somebody *had* been standing at that very twist in the path.’ Seeing the astonishment in my face, he amplified. ‘You remember when I called out to that chap not to move because I wanted to see if he was visible from the other clearing? That, my dear Tapers, was a ruse. What I wanted to do was to have a look at that very turn in the path, to see if there was anything in the notion of yours or not; it occurred to me that the police might not have bothered to examine the ground a yard or two off the path. But I didn’t want him to know what I was going to do, or he’d have wanted to come and do it too; and at present, in view of what we agreed last night, I’m rather keeping any discoveries I may make to myself.’

‘Well?’ I asked in excitement.

‘Well, as I say, you were perfectly right. Someone had been standing there, and, judging from the number of marks, for more than a short time. And then, judging from two marks in particular, more deeply indented than the others, for quite a few minutes in one particular spot – during which, I think we might infer, not a muscle was moved. (It’s not easy to keep the feet absolutely still for more than half a minute, unless one’s standing absolutely rigid, you know.) And I think we might also infer that those few minutes were the particular ones that elapsed between your leaving the glade and the second shot. Now then: what do you think of that, young Tapers?’

For once in my life, I did not even notice the distasteful appellation. 'But are you sure of this? How can you be? I thought the ground was too hard to take marks. That fellow said so.'

'So the paths were. This particular place, however, was quite damp - well-shaded, lush grass, in winter probably boggy. Anyhow, it certainly wasn't too hard to take impressions, because the impressions are there.'

'Well, I can't understand it,' I could only mutter feebly.

'And what is more, Tapers,' Sheringham continued, in a voice more significant still, 'it may interest you to know that whoever stood there wore high-heeled shoes.'

I looked at him sharply. 'A woman!'

'You draw the deduction,' Sheringham said ironically, 'just as swiftly as I did.'

I can only say that I was genuinely thunderstruck at the news. It was the last thing in the world that I could have expected.

After breakfast Sheringham told me that he was going out to see the superintendent, if he had arrived. Did I wish him to say anything about the footprints he had discovered, or not?

'No,' I said firmly, for I had already made up my mind on that point. 'Not yet, at any rate.'

'But if I get the impression that he's out for your blood at the inquest?'

'In any case,' I told him, 'we must find out more about them, and particularly who made them, before we divulge the information to the police.'

'Very well,' he agreed. 'After all, it's your pigeon.'

We were in the hall, speaking of course in low tones.

‘I shall wait for you in the study,’ I said. ‘John will certainly let us have the use of it when we want it during the next few days.’

Sheringham nodded and went out. I sauntered into the garden to ponder further over those mysterious footprints. Who could possibly have made them?

I was leaning against one of the trees which border the banked edge of the front of the garden, looking absently out over the view across the valley, when my name spoken in a low voice just behind me caused me to turn round hastily. It was Elsa Verity, the first time I had seen her since her fiancé’s death.

The embarrassment at once seized me which always seems to attach to the presence of the recently bereaved, but in this case it was intensified by the thought which instantly flashed through my mind: did she too think me responsible for Eric’s death?

If she did, I was relieved to notice that she did not show it. She was pale, naturally, and there was fear as well as grief in her eyes, but this I put down to the impending inquest, which hung heavy over all of us. In any case there was certainly no shrinking from my person, as otherwise could hardly have failed to be the case.

‘Mr Pinkerton,’ she said quietly, ‘may I speak to you a minute?’

‘Of course,’ I said gently. ‘Let me bring you out a chair.’

‘No, thank you. I only want to ask you one thing. No, two things.’ She glanced back towards the house, as if to make sure that no one was within earshot. ‘Mr Pinkerton, is it true that Eric had been having an affair with Mrs de Ravel?’

I only hesitated a moment. One look into her eyes told me that the time for subterfuges had gone by; she wanted the truth, and she had a right to the truth. ‘Yes, Elsa. Quite true.’

‘She had been his mistress? You know for certain?’ The poor child spoke quite collectedly. It was evident that the question was dreadfully familiar to her mind.

‘For certain,’ I replied.

‘Thank you. That’s one thing I wanted to ask you. The other was this: was he wanting to marry me only for my money?’

That came as a greater shock, and I did not feel myself competent to answer it directly. ‘Have you any reason to think so?’ I temporized.

‘Yes, Ethel told me so. She thought I’d better know. I want to ask you if you thought so too – if everyone thought so.’ Her voice did break there for an instant, but only on a single word.

‘Yes, I did. And I think everyone did.’ With Ethel taking the responsibility of the knowledge, I could only feel it my duty to confirm it.

She did not answer for a moment but gazed, as I had been doing a minute ago, out over the wooded slopes beyond us. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured. ‘That does make it – easier.’

Without another word she turned and went into the house again.

I followed her with my eyes, and saw her meet and pass Ethel in the doorway, and caught Ethel’s eye. Something in it seemed to summon me, and I walked towards her. At the same moment she came out to me.

Before I could speak she had caught my hand in hers and grasped it tightly. ‘Whatever happens this morning, dear, dear Cyril,’ she whispered, ‘you’ll know that we...that we...’ Her voice broke more than Elsa’s had done.

My embarrassment, too, was greater than Elsa had caused me, very much greater. Anyone might have seen us from the house.



I succeeded in withdrawing my hand. 'Thank you, Ethel,' I said, more lightly than I felt. 'But it won't happen, you know. By the way,' I hurried on, alarmed by the growing intensity of her expression, 'I've just confirmed what you'd told Elsa about Eric being after her money. She asked me point-blank, and I thought you would wish me to do so.'

Ethel was quite evidently surprised. 'What I'd told her? I never told her anything of the sort, Cyril.'

I was surprised in my turn. 'She said you had. Quite definitely. She said you said it would be better for her to know.'

'I dare say it is, but I certainly never told her. I was quite sure she wouldn't believe it. I intended to later, when she had got over the first shock, to make her forget him more easily. But how very strange.'

'She must have suspected it somehow, and thought you wouldn't give her a straight answer,' I said thoughtfully. 'So she used an innocent subterfuge to obtain the truth. It was plucky of her.'

'Yes,' Ethel agreed, no less thoughtfully. 'She is plucky. She's taken the whole thing wonderfully well. I must admit that there's more stamina in her than I imagined. She may be as ignorant of the world as ever I thought, but she's certainly not so milk-and-watery as - well, as Sylvia fancied. In fact, in a stand-up fight between the two of them, I'm not nearly so sure as I was that Sylvia would have won. Well, thank goodness it didn't come to that.'

'Amen,' I replied earnestly.

'And thank *you*, dear friend,' Ethel said, with a return of her intense look.

'I expect Sheringham back any minute now,' I said hastily. 'He'll do wonders, you'll see. I think I'll stroll along and meet him.'

The only successful way, I have learned, of coping with feminine emotion is firmly to avoid it.

I went down the six stone steps from the garden, crossed the open lane, and sat down on the edge of the steeply sloping field beyond which I could see Sheringham from whatever direction he came.

But even there I was not to remain long alone. I had *The Times* with me and was making a pretence of reading it, but happening to glance back towards the house I saw Armorel moodily slouching down the steps. She advanced across the lane in my direction. I would much rather have remained alone.

She plumped down beside me, drew her knees up under her chin, clasped them with her bare brown arms, and stared gloomily ahead of her in silence.

‘Well, Armorel?’ I said.

‘Damn this inquest,’ she muttered. ‘Damn and damn it. I’m dreading it.’

‘You?’ I queried in surprise.

‘Yes, *me*,’ she returned, quite fiercely.

I hesitated for a moment. ‘If you’re afraid of it coming out that you said to me – what you said to me in Bluebell Wood that morning, I really don’t see how they can possibly manage to – ’

‘Oh, *that*,’ she muttered contemptuously.

Armorel has always been an insoluble enigma to me. At one moment I am convinced that I really do know her at last, the next I am in despair of ever knowing the first thing about her. Certainly I could not understand her that morning, or the reason for her strange mood, which caused her apparently to seek my company and then snap at me when she had got it. Anyone might have thought that it was she who was suspected of having killed her cousin.

‘I’ve just been having a few words with Elsa,’ I said, determined to shift the topic of conversation from our two selves. ‘Really, I was surprised to find how very well she has taken it. I expected to see her on the point of collapse, or just recovering from one.’

‘Yes,’ Armorel nodded. ‘Eric may have taken her in, but she always took you in, Pinkie, didn’t she?’

‘Took me in? With what?’

‘Her style. The blue-eyed-doll pose.“Oh, Mr Pinkerton, do tell me some more about your wonderful stamp collection. How *marvellous* it must be to collect stamps as well as you do!”’ Armorel’s caricature of Miss Verity’s pretty way of drawing me out on our walks together was ridiculous, of course, but there was enough reminiscence of truth in it to make me glance at her uneasily.

‘What do you mean, Armorel?’

‘And then she’d come back and imitate what you’d said to her to Eric and me, till we nearly died of laughter,’ Armorel continued, returning my glance with positive malice.

‘She – she did?’ I exclaimed, much shocked. I remembered Eric’s words to the same effect that evening he had – that unfortunate evening; could it be possible that he had not been drawing on a crude invention after all, as I had imagined?

‘She certainly did,’ Armorel mocked. ‘Oh, yes, my poor Pinkie, you were properly taken in. No wonder you thought yourself in love with her.’

‘Certainly I never imagined anything of the sort,’ I retorted, grieved and hurt by this revelation of Miss Verity’s astonishing and unkind duplicity, and yet with a fleeting moment to spare for wonder too at the way in which Armorel seemed to be positively delighting in rubbing salt into the wounds of my gullibility. ‘Far from it.’

Really, I do not think I shall ever understand Armorel. She simply rounded on me. 'You were!' she blazed. 'Can't you speak the truth for once? You know perfectly well you were. Just because your damned conceit's hurt, you pretend you weren't what you know perfectly well you were. Of course you were in love with her. Good God, Pinkie, you make me sick. What the hell do you think you've got to be so damned conceited about? You're taken in up to the eyebrows by any girl who comes along, and then you pretend - Oh, shut up, for God's sake.'

I was so amazed at this attack that I could not even be annoyed with its perversions, its lack of truth, and its incredible lack of logic. To cap all, I had not even attempted to speak when I was ordered so peremptorily to be silent.

I think I may claim credit for saying only, and in the mildest manner: 'One would think you really wished me to be in love with Miss Verity, Armorel.' Though how it could affect her in any way whether I was in love with Miss Verity or not I could not imagine, to say nothing of the chit's impertinence in referring at all to my purely private feelings. But no doubt (I reflected charitably) her mind was still harping on the ridiculous idea of being responsible for her cousin's death by indirectly inciting me to murder. That at any rate was the kindest explanation.

'Of course I don't wish you to be in love with her,' she snapped at me now. 'What the blazes do you think it matters to me whether you are or not? Of course I want you to be. Didn't I say so the night before last? Anyhow, I don't care a hang if you are or not. So now you know.'

That, however, was certainly not the case. So far from enlightening me, Armorel had succeeded, almost incredibly, in contradicting herself no less than four times in half a dozen sentences. I contented myself with saying merely: 'I don't think you're quite yourself this morning, Armorel, are you?'

‘Well, who would be, sitting next to you?’ was her quite gratuitously insulting retort.

I could not refrain from pointing out that at least I had not forced my company on her. I had not even invited her to sit next to me.

‘Well, if you don’t want me so much, why didn’t you say so?’ she replied angrily. ‘I’d better go.’

Fortunately at that moment Sheringham came in sight, and I hailed him. ‘You’ll excuse me, Armored,’ I was beginning, when she cut me short by calling Sheringham to come down to us.

Really, her effrontery was outrageous. As soon as Sheringham had approached us she said: ‘Come on, Mr Sheringham. We’ve been waiting for you. Tell us all about it.’ And she actually smiled at him. To hear her two minutes ago, one would have said that she would never smile at anyone again.

I felt I simply must interpose on this calm settling of my own affairs. ‘You will excuse us, Armored,’ I said, with deliberate stiffness, ‘but Sheringham and I wish to discuss –

‘Whether the superintendent’s going to have you arrested immediately after the inquest, or give you a bit more rope. Come off your perch, Pinkie. We all know the police think you shot Eric, we all know that Mr Sheringham’s come down to try and convince them you didn’t, and I want to know what he thinks of his chances. Don’t be a spoil-sport, Pinkie.’

I was so indignant I could not trust myself to speak.

Sheringham, however saw fit to endeavour to be funny. At least, no doubt he thought it funny. Personally, I considered it merely offensive.

‘So you call him, “Pinkie”, do you?’ he said, with an appearance of great interest. ‘That’s odd. I call him

“Tapers”, myself.’

‘Yes. So you told us last night. Well, there’s a lot to be said for it, but I think “Pinkie” suits him better. Just look at him now, for instance. Did you ever see anything pinker?’

No doubt my countenance was suffused with irritation. It cannot have been considered good taste to refer to the fact.

I rose to my feet, with difficulty keeping my exasperation within decent bounds. ‘There is a time for pleasantries, and for the reverse. I cannot consider this to be the former. When you have finished your joke with Miss Scott-Davies, Sheringham, I shall be interested to hear what you have to tell me. You will find me in Hillyard’s study.’

Armored caught me by the trouser leg. ‘No, don’t go, Pinkie. I was a beast. It was only to keep my own silly spirits up. Don’t be angry.’

Sheringham too began to apologize, with one of the swift changes of mood which I remembered in him even as a small boy. ‘You’re perfectly right, Tapers. Damned offensive of me. I’m sorry. And good God, it’s no time for joking, as you say.’ He looked doubtfully at Armored.

I detest the man who, however gross the offence, churlishly refuses to accept a sincere apology for it. Both had made amends for their ill-timed jesting, and I intimated in a word or two that the matter was already forgotten. But I too looked doubtfully at Armored, and meaningly too.

‘No, *please* don’t send me away,’ she implored, in a manner as different from the one in which she had seen fit to address me a few minutes ago as one can well imagine. ‘Pinkie *darling*, let me hear the news. I’m – I’m almost as anxious as you are, for you to be cleared, you know. And there’s nothing I don’t know about the case already. Do let me stay.’

‘It’s for you to say, Tapers,’ remarked Sheringham, rather gruffly.

I looked down again at Armorel. She was actually clasping my leg, so that I could not have moved if I wished. *'Please, Pinkie!'*

I really had no option but to invite her to remain.

Sheringham glanced at his watch as I reseated myself. *'It's half-past ten.'*

*'We haven't far to go,'* Armorel put in. *'The inquest is in one of the barns here.'*

Sheringham nodded, as if he knew that already. *'Well, it won't take me a minute to say what I've got to say. I've had a talk with the superintendent. He wasn't inclined to be communicative, but one thing stuck out a yard long: you're in damned hot water, Tapers, my boy.'*

*'I know that,'* I sighed. The news did not surprise me.

*'Are they - are they going to arrest him?'* Armorel asked, with an odd little catch in her voice. The girl seemed really concerned now. I could not make her out.

*'I couldn't gather that,'* Sheringham replied gravely. *'But I rather think they are. I hinted that the evidence wasn't sufficient, that it was only evidence really of motive and opportunity; there was none to connect you at all with the rifle from which the fatal shot was fired, or even to establish your familiarity with firearms at all, which I should have thought indispensable; in fact, what evidence there was in that connection pointed definitely the other way.'*

*'Yes?'* I said, quite calmly.

*'And he hinted back that a piece of evidence of some sort or other had just come into his hands which might make all the difference. He wouldn't give me any idea of what it was, but it's going to be brought out at the inquest. So prepare for a shock during the proceedings, Tapers.'*

*'Certainly,'* I replied. *'But I've had so many shocks these last few days that I don't think one more can make much*

difference.'

'Well, you take it dam' well, I must say,' Sheringham was good enough to observe.

'He's been *marvellous*,' Armorel said vigorously, catching at my arm, which she continued to hold in a curiously protective kind of way. 'Oh, Mr Sheringham, you must clear him - you must!'

'I'm sure Sheringham will do his utmost, my dear girl,' I remarked.

Sheringham muttered something to the effect that he certainly would.

'And is that all your news?' I asked.

'Yes. I don't think the superintendent's going to be obstructive, but I equally don't think he's going to be helpful. And listening between the words, I'm pretty sure he's made up his mind about you, Tapers. You're guilty, I rather gather, because nobody else can be.'

'In other words,' Armorel put in, 'simply because he was down there when that last shot was fired, and no one else was?'

'Yes, and no third person was either, to witness that Tapers didn't fire the shot. Or to prove that Hillyard's *was* the second shot. That comes to the same thing.'

'Yes, I see,' Armorel said thoughtfully. 'We want two people really, don't we? One, the guilty person, and one to witness that Pinkie didn't fire the second shot. Or, as you say, that John did.'

'If we could find the first of those two, the second wouldn't be needed.'

'Yes, but as we can't, the second would at any rate clear Pinkie, if it didn't help to find out who actually did shoot Eric. If - if it really wasn't an accident after all.'



‘Oh, yes,’ Sheringham agreed. ‘The second would do that.’ He spoke without enthusiasm, and it was evident that he had no hopes of such a person existing. ‘By the way,’ he added to me, ‘I didn’t say anything about – you know what.’

‘What?’ asked Armorel quickly.

‘No,’ I said quietly.

‘You absolutely forbade it, remember.’

‘Quite correct.’

‘*What?*’ Armorel repeated.

‘Oh, one piece of evidence at any rate that Sheringham’s unearthed which may prove helpful later on,’ I said, purposely carelessly.

‘It might prove helpful now,’ Sheringham said with emphasis. ‘It might very well prevent your arrest. Don’t be a fool, Tapers. Let me tell the superintendent.’

‘No,’ I said firmly. ‘Not yet.’

Sheringham shrugged his shoulders.

Armorel looked from one to the other of us, but as it was clear that she was not to be enlightened, had the rather unexpected good sense to refrain from pressing us.

Sheringham jumped suddenly to his feet. ‘Well, I mustn’t waste any more time. I’m not coming to the inquest. I can read all the evidence afterwards. It’s too good an opportunity to miss of having a look around undisturbed. See you later, Tapers. And if they do put the gyves on you, keep your tail up. I’ll make the superintendent the sorriest man in Devonshire before I’m done.’

## **chapter eleven**

I am not likely to forget the inquest on Scott-Davies so long as I live.

I had never attended an inquest before, so that the procedure was unfamiliar to me. If I were a practised novelist no doubt I should be able to dilate on the contrast between the old stone-built barn, with its homely smell of hay and straw, and the grim purpose to which it was now being put; on the strange aspect of the trestle tables set out upon its mud-trodden floor, with the coroner and the solemn-faced jury at one end and the sharp-featured reporters at another; on the interest with which I watched this inquiry into the circumstances attending the death of a man known to myself.

I intend to do none of these things, for they were no more than surface impressions. My real and only feeling, which I will not conceal from the reader though I did my best to hide it at the time, was one of sick apprehension regarding this vital piece of evidence which Sheringham had told me was now in the hands of the police. What it might be I could not imagine, but it was clearly serious. Had they in some cunning way managed to connect me with that rifle which had been removed from the house earlier in the day? I did not see how it was possible, but nothing could surprise me now.

I sat on a bench, between John and Ethel; and it seemed to me that the anxious solicitude with which Ethel was treating me must stamp me indubitably to all onlookers as the guilty person. John was naturally aware of my

uneasiness, and endeavoured to distract me by pointing out the various local bigwigs. The coroner, I learned, was a solicitor in Budeford, the foreman of the jury an important farmer; the rest of the jury was composed almost entirely of men gaining their livelihood from agriculture, whether as employers or employed. It was only to have been expected, but the fact did not make me feel any the easier; it has been my experience that the practice of agriculture dulls the wits of all who engage in it.

Besides the coroner, the police solicitor was the only other legal man present. I of course was not represented, in spite of John's urging.

Before the proceedings began I noticed a conference taking place at one end of the barn which I did not care about at all. It was between the coroner, Mr Gifford (the police solicitor), Superintendent Hancock, and a tall man with grey hair whom John had already pointed out to me as Colonel Grace, the chief constable. None of them so much as glanced in our direction, yet I felt utterly positive that I was their subject. When the conversation finished Superintendent Hancock seated his burly form on a bench opposite us close to the door of the barn. Still he did not glance towards me, apparently busy with a notebook, but I had the uncomfortable feeling that he was watching me the whole time.

The jury were sworn, and then immediately were marshalled out to view the body, which was lying in an adjacent shed. They returned more solemn even than before, and the coroner at once began to make his preliminary statement, addressing the jury in quite informal tones and language.

Unexpectedly to myself, but to my relief, I was the first witness called, as having been the person to discover the body. When I have an unpleasant task ahead of me, I prefer

to get it over as soon as possible. At least I should not be long now in learning the worst.

I think I may flatter myself that I succeeded in presenting a collected front as I took up the position indicated to me at the witness table. None of the strangers whose eyes were fastened on me could have gathered that beneath my calm appearance my heart was thumping in a really suffocating manner.

The first questions were purely formal, my age, my profession or occupation, the length of time I had known the Hillyards, and the rest. I answered them in a voice which, I was privately pleased to find, remained perfectly steady. Furthermore, the coroner, a little elderly man with a trim grey beard and gold spectacles, was courtesy and kindness itself. If he had received any warning to treat me as what I believe is termed a hostile witness, there was no trace of it in his manner. I began to feel just a very little bit more at my ease.

‘Now, Mr Pinkerton,’ he said, after I had, so to speak, identified myself, ‘I’m not going to ask you any questions about how this little play that all of you enacted, as I was telling the jury, came into being. Mr Hillyard, who I understand was largely responsible for its composition, can tell us that. We’ll go straight on, if you don’t mind, to its performance. Now just tell the jury in your own words what happened after you left the house at approximately, I understand’ – he shuffled hurriedly among his notes – ‘yes, 2:45 that afternoon.’

‘With pleasure,’ I replied, with a slight bow, and turning to the jury I gave as succinct an account as I could of the events in question. From time to time the coroner interposed a question to make clear some point insufficiently elucidated. It was all exactly as I had expected. My troubles, I knew, would not come yet.

I described our performance of the mock drama. ('I want you to listen very carefully to this, gentlemen,' remarked the coroner confidentially to the jury. 'It is essential that we should differentiate clearly between what was pretended and what actually happened.') I narrated the part played by the three pseudo-detectives, who were of course all now in court, and I put forth the circumstances in which I heard the two shots fired, with my own subsequent discovery of the body. Fortunately it seemed that the officious individual who is popularly supposed to be included always in a coroner's jury did not seem on this occasion to be present, for none of them volunteered to ask awkward questions – though I knew that my fill of awkward questions would very soon arrive.

It did so with the end of my narrative, when the coroner leaned back in his chair and murmured: 'Thank you, Mr Pinkerton, thank you. That seems very clear. Er – have you any questions you wish to put to the witness, Mr Gifford?'

Mr Gifford rose with alacrity. I knew my real ordeal was upon me, and took a fresh grip of myself.

His first remarks were quite unexpected. 'Just one or two points, Mr Pinkerton. In a case like this, you'll agree that accuracy regarding times is essential. Now I have here a suggested timetable covering the period with which we're really concerned, and I should like to know whether you agree with it. I'll read it out:

'3:30 p.m. You and Mrs Fitzwilliam begin to ascend the hill, Professor Johnson and Mr Bradley having gone on a few yards ahead of you.

'3:32 p.m. The first shot.

'3:33 p.m. You go back.

'3:34 p.m. You reach the bottom and pass out of Mrs Fitzwilliam's observation.

'3:37 p.m. The second shot.

'3:43 p.m. You begin to ascend again.

'3:44 p.m. You reach the point where you left Mrs Fitzwilliam and do not find her there, and a strange impulse seizes you to go down again, which you do.

'3:45 p.m. You discover the body in an unfrequented track, and, without examining it, turn away to find help, and encounter Mr Hillyard.

'3:46 p.m. Mr Hillyard notes the time.

'Do you agree to those times?'

I saw at once that I had to deal with a tricky mind, and it was necessary more than ever to keep my head. Under the pretext of asking me to agree to a timetable merely, I was being asked to agree also to a number of quite damaging insinuations. And in any case the timetable was grossly inadequate. As it happened, Sheringham had also insisted on a timetable the previous evening, and John and I had compiled one between us which was as accurate as we could make it, so that I had the points more or less at my fingers' ends.

All this passed in a series of rapid thoughts through my mind, so that there was no pause before I answered coolly: 'Certainly not. It contains several inaccuracies.'

'And yet I understand that it is based chiefly on your own statements?'

'Some of the intervals are as I estimated them. Others are quite different.'

'Perhaps you would indicate where you disagree?'

'Certainly. Might I see the document?'

'With pleasure.'

I took it and glanced through it, trying to focus my attention on the details. The main inaccuracy had been quite obvious to me as I heard it read, and I was at once convinced that the timetable had been deliberately cooked

to provide it. Instead of the two or three minutes which had actually elapsed between my hearing the second shot and reaching the spot where I had left Mrs Fitzwilliam, no less than seven minutes were now shown. The inference was obvious: that during these seven minutes I, having killed Eric Scott-Davies by firing the second shot, am busily occupied in making the death appear accidental. A pretty trap!

I referred to this error first. 'I see that the second shot is given as 3:37. It certainly wasn't so early as that.'

'Ah! Now what time would you put it at, then?'

'3:42,' I replied.

'Why 3:42?'

'Because it could not have been more than about three minutes before Mr Hillyard joined me.'

'During which time you ascended the path through the wood, and went down again?'

'Exactly.'

'You're certain that wouldn't have taken you longer than three minutes?'

'Perfectly.'

'Very well. Do you agree with the other times, as shown?'

'No, I do not. The first shot was certainly later than two minutes after we made a move towards the house. I should put that at 3:35. I did not go down immediately, and certainly did not reach the bottom before 3:39.'

'You seem very sure of these times, Mr Pinkerton. Did you by any chance make a note of the time of the two shots?'

I was not to be caught so easily as that. 'No, I didn't. But as you say, I quite realized the importance of having the times as accurate as possible, and Mr Hillyard and I, with a

friend of mine, were therefore at some pains to make out a timetable last night.'

'In preparation for this morning?' asked the man, with what he evidently considered an unpleasant insinuation.

'Precisely. We thought it might assist the court. I have a copy with me. Perhaps you would like it. From all our recollections the times are very much more accurate than those you mentioned.' A distinct point, I thought, to me. It gave me confidence.

'Thank you,' replied Mr Gifford at once, and took the paper I was offering him. 'Now I see that, even according to your own account, you spent at least six minutes down at the bottom. I should like you to explain in rather more detail exactly what you did during them. It is not necessary for me to add that, if it was the first shot that killed Mr Scott-Davies, you were all that time within a very few yards of his dead body, and if it was the second shot, you were within a very few yards of him when he actually died. It does not, as I say, need me to point out to you, Mr Pinkerton, the extreme importance of your evidence concerning these six minutes which you spent, as you say, down there alone.'

It was exactly the same dilemma in which the superintendent had already placed me, and in almost the same words. In spite of the thought I had devoted to the point, I could give no more convincing an answer. That is not to say that I did not do my best. 'I had gone down, as I said, to reassure Mrs Fitzwilliam. I called out several times to whoever might be shooting - a point on which I understand Mrs Fitzwilliam can confirm me.' I added with a little bow in the direction of the lady herself, who nodded slightly. John had already told me, the previous evening, that he would see that Mrs Fitzwilliam did confirm me on that point.

'When I was convinced that the firer must have moved on, the second shot being so much farther away, I went back to



where we had played our little drama and picked up my cigarette case and matches, which I remembered having left there. I may have dawdled. Probably I did. Then I went up the hill, as I said just now, and down again.'

'And that is all you can tell us?'

'Really, I don't see what more I could possibly tell you. There *is* nothing more to tell you.'

'No? And yet six minutes is a long time, Mr Pinkerton, when one is doing nothing. You did nothing at all for six minutes, in spite of the fact that a second shot was fired during them quite close to you?'

'Excuse me, the shot did not sound at all close. It sounded some distance away, upstream.'

And so it went on, with the same constant attempts to trip me up, and the same insinuations slipped in alongside of correctly stated facts, till I was hard put to it to keep a level head. The direction of the two shots, the sound of them, what I had said to Superintendent Hancock and how I reconciled it with what I stated now, so on and so forth, *ad nauseam*, almost literally.

So far it was all familiar ground at any rate, so that I knew the pitfalls in my path and could avoid them. But when it came to new territory I fell, like the veriest blunderer, into the very first trap spread for me.

'Now, Mr Pinkerton, you were all of course very interested in this little burlesque you were to perform? You were all eagerly inventing details to add to its verisimilitude?'

'Yes,' I said. That seemed innocent enough.

'And did you contribute anything? Oh - I beg your pardon. Yes, I have a note here that you did, the spot of lead on the coat, to represent blood; a very lifelike touch. That was your suggestion?'

How easy to have denied it. But I did not know what was to follow. 'Yes,' I agreed, unthinking.

'Quite so. You suggested putting that conspicuous touch of paint on Mr Scott-Davies' coat. Now I believe that Mr Scott-Davies frequently took a gun with him (we shall have evidence, I think, on that point later) when he went out for a stroll at Minton Deeps, and elsewhere no doubt in the country. Is that a practice of yours, Mr Pinkerton?'

'Certainly not.'

'You seem very emphatic.'

'I think my objection to taking life is well known among my friends.'

'I see. Is it because you object to taking wild life that you do not shoot?'

'Certainly.'

'But you know how to handle a gun?'

I hesitated for a moment. 'Well, I know how a gun works, of course.'

'That was not my question. I asked if you knew how to handle a gun – a rifle, we'll say.'

'I never do so.'

'You give me the impression that you are quite unacquainted with firearms. Is that what you wish me to understand?'

It was foolish of me, but the fellow's sneering tone irritated me. I know now that this was precisely what he was endeavouring to do, and I blame myself for accommodating him. I answered, shortly: 'You may understand anything you like.'

'Thank you. I probably shall. I understand, for instance, that' – he turned a little more towards the jury, so that they should miss nothing of the significance – 'that when at

Fernhurst school you were considered a crack shot. That you represented the school, in fact, for three years as a member of the shooting eight at Bisley, and that for two years in succession you won the school Marksman's Cup. Is that correct?'

'Perfectly.' The blow had fallen. *This* was the piece of evidence they had discovered, as I had been dreading all the time. Well, it was deadly enough; and the way that impertinent little solicitor had introduced it made it sound deadlier still. I had not heard the end of that fatal inspiration concerning the red paint.

'Perhaps you would like to explain to the jury, then, why you wished just now to convey the impression that you were quite unacquainted with the use of firearms?'

I looked round the court, at Ethel's face unbecomingly blotched with anxiety, at Armorer's dead-white one, at Mrs Fitzwilliam's strained expression, at Superintendent Hancock studiously regarding his boots, at the little coroner uneasily fidgeting with his pencil, at the stolid faces of the jury already quickening with a suspicion that had penetrated even to their dull minds; and I was surprised to notice how calm I felt. To tell the truth, I had completely given up hope; and that has a wonderfully tranquillizing effect.

'I wished nothing of the kind,' I replied coolly. 'If you yourself gathered such an impression, you were mistaken.'

'Perhaps you will be good enough to leave me out of it. Would you like to tell them instead, then, why you never mentioned this important fact to any of those responsible for the investigations into Mr Scott-Davies' death?'

I turned to the coroner. 'Sir, I must ask you to protect me against this gentleman's manner of framing his questions. Surely it is most irregular. Why should he assume that the fact was important at all, or that I knew it was? Is he entitled to combine two questions in one like that by taking it for

granted that I did *not* mention the fact? I have had to submit to these insinuations contained in questions long enough. I look to you, sir, to prevent their recurrence.'

The little coroner looked extremely uncomfortable. 'The witness is quite right, Mr Gifford. I must agree with him that your last question was most unfair. You must, you certainly must – h'rrrrrm! – frame them more carefully.'

Mr Gifford eyed me maliciously. 'Certainly, if the witness is becoming uneasy. We will put it in this way, Mr Pinkerton.'

But there is no need for me to continue. Every possible bad construction was put on my actions, not outright in spite of my protest but still only to be inferred. I answered calmly, but I did not seem to be answering consciously at all. A curious dreamlike fatalism had taken possession of me, in which everything seemed already predestined for the worst, and though I could hear myself from outside, as it were, replying to one damning question after another, it really did not matter in the least what I said as my fate was already settled.

Finally I gave way to this sensation by replying quietly to one of the endless questions as to why I had done this and that, and why I had not done that and the other: 'For this reason, sir. I knew the police suspected me of having shot Mr Scott-Davies, and in such circumstances it seemed to me folly to volunteer information which could only confirm their view. I think if an unfortunate set of chances ever placed you in a similar position, sir, or any other person in this room, you would act in precisely the same way.'

That, I believe, did take the man aback for a moment. Indeed I have been given to understand that it created what the newspapers the next day described as a 'sensation'. But I was past caring at the moment.

The fellow of course recovered himself the next instant and managed to take advantage of me. He turned to the

coroner and said: 'In his own interests, I think I had better ask this witness no further questions until he has had proper advice.'

'I quite agree,' said the little coroner hastily. 'Er - thank you, Mr Pinkerton. That will do. You - er - you may stand down'.

I returned to my seat, and the shocked faces of Ethel and John, conscious that every eye was pursuing me and hearing quite audibly the expulsion of pent-up breath which followed me there. From John's reproachful silence, and Ethel's gasps, I gathered I had thrown away any chance I might have had of avoiding an adverse verdict, or even arrest. Well, what did it matter?

I relapsed into something approaching a conscious stupor.

Vaguely I was aware of John's name being called, and of his rising from my side, but I retain only the dimmest impression of his actual evidence. I was, in fact, encouraging the strange torpor which had possessed me. I leaned back into it, so to speak, and let it envelop me; it was a curious but very welcome refuge from the dismal realities which confronted me. I have no doubt it was cowardice, but I think it may be regarded as a not unnatural reaction for my bruised nervous system.

I learned afterwards that John's evidence produced nothing fresh, nor Ethel's after him. They were both eager, over-eager perhaps, to say anything possible in my favour, but there was little opportunity. John, for instance, was forced to recount the incident of my immersion by Scott-Davies in the swimming pool, and though Ethel did her best to assure the court that my supposed attraction for Elsa Verity had no foundation beyond a pleasant liking (which cannot have been very nice for the girl, sitting there in full view of everyone, to hear) I gathered later that she felt even her own words to be carrying small conviction.

Dr Samson was next called, and confirmed our impression that the bullet had passed straight through the dead man's heart. He was not pressed as to the estimated time of death, as the point was not in question. He was followed by Superintendent Hancock.

The superintendent's evidence did not amount to much, I believe. He was entirely noncommittal, confining himself to facts, such as there were of them. The chief thing which impressed John, as he told us afterwards, was the fairness with which the superintendent allowed the theory of accident. He admitted frankly that, on the facts, there was very little inconsistent with the verdict of accidental death. The path of the bullet was the only thing which seemed to point definitely away from it.

One interesting point came out in this connection. The rifle lying on the ground behind Scott-Davies bore his fingerprints only. This in itself we knew already to be without necessary significance; but what did sound significant was the fact that the position of the prints indicated that Eric had both held the rifle in the usual way by the middle, and had also grasped it by the end of the barrel - in precisely the way he would have done had he really been dragging it after him. Whether this added more meaning to the fact of his prints being there at all, is not for me to say; but the court was undoubtedly interested to hear that the prints on the other gun that had fired the blank cartridge, which it had already been stated in evidence that I had produced from Eric's limp fingers, were haphazard, and showed no holding position.

The coroner then adjourned for the luncheon interval, and I had to bring myself back to life. As I passed out of the barn I was only too conscious of the curious looks that accompanied me.

At the door Superintendent Hancock spoke to John. 'All your party will come back this afternoon, sir, won't they -

even those who've given evidence already? The coroner may want to recall them.'

'Certainly,' said John stiffly.

I felt a mild surprise that I was allowed to follow him out at all.

## **chapter twelve**

Luncheon was a dismal meal. Nobody said much. Even the De Ravels seemed to have abated their hostility towards me, which was in itself a bad sign. Sheringham did not appear at all. I was told that he had asked for a packet of sandwiches and taken himself off somewhere, no one knew where. Poor Armorel avoided my eyes, and I noticed that her hands shook from time to time as she handled her implements; evidently she was dreading her appearance at the witness table. As for Miss Verity, she appeared strangely composed, perhaps the most composed of all of us. In view of her painful position, it seemed to me odd. But I had already learned her possibilities of duplicity.

When the proceedings were renewed she was the first witness called. My protective lethargy had now disappeared. I made a faint effort to recapture it, in self-defence, but without success, so turned to a careful attention to the evidence

Elsa's ordeal did not last long. She deposed that Eric and herself had got engaged on the morning of the tragedy, and that he had seemed quite his normal self that morning, which they had spent almost entirely together; her other evidence was concerned with her own movements after the little play, when she had gone to Bluebell Wood, waited there the stipulated time, and then come back to the house, to be met by Ethel with news of the tragedy. In fine, her evidence added nothing to our knowledge or to my aid.

De Ravel, the next witness, provided me with a minor surprise. He admitted that his wife had been with him at the



swimming pool, instead of where she was supposed to be sun-bathing, during the period when the two shots were fired. This he had apparently told the police after all. Mrs de Ravel confirmed his evidence. Asked the reason, she replied merely that the proceedings had bored her; she had thought them childish; and though prepared to tell our sham detectives that she had been sun-bathing, she had seen no reason why she need be alone in actual fact. How far all this was from the real truth of course the jury had no inkling, for the drama that had been so vividly acted in the drawing room had been touched upon only in passing and its real significance quite unrevealed.

That the police had some kind of idea of her former relations with Eric was, however, shown by a few questions put to her by the man Gifford, but these were so delicately phrased (in contrast with the ones put to me) that it was possible to infer that the object in putting them had been, not to divulge the scandal to the jury, but to intimate that, though they might attach not much importance to it, the fact of the intrigue was known to the police and Mrs de Ravel had therefore better mind her p's and q's. I appreciated the subtlety. I appreciated also the completely unruffled *insouciance* with which Mrs de Ravel received the intimation.

Armored was then called, the last of our little party.

The opening of her evidence was stereotyped enough, with questions from the coroner to bring out her relation to Eric and so forth. The doctor having already stated that suicide was quite out of the question, no awkward queries were put to her which would have necessitated divulging Eric's financial dilemma. It was quite perfunctorily that the coroner went on to ask her, as he had asked all the rest of us, about her movements after watching the mock murder.

'I pretended to go up the hill to where I was supposed to be reading in a field, for the play we were doing,' Armored

replied in a clear voice. 'But I didn't really. As soon as the others were out of sight I came back, and hid in the bushes at the side.'

I started violently, and my heart seemed to stop beating for a moment and then gallop. What - *what* on earth was the girl going to say?

I don't know whether anyone but myself appreciated at once the tremendous, the absolutely overwhelming importance of this simple statement. I simply dared not glance at Ethel or John. I held my breath.

The coroner looked merely surprised. 'Oh? Why did you do that, Miss Scott-Davies?'

'Well, it didn't seem to matter. Like Mrs de Ravel, I thought it was all rather silly really, and it would do quite well enough if I just *said* I'd been reading in the field. I thought it would be more amusing to watch our detectives.'

By this time the coroner had grasped something of the significance of this new development. He shuffled his notes and looked at Armorel reproachfully.

'But didn't you tell the police subsequently that in point of fact you *had* been in the field?'

'Yes,' Armorel agreed at once, with an amiable little smile. 'Yes, I did. I suppose I shouldn't have done really, but when I heard Eric was really dead I thought it would save an awful lot of bother. And of course after I'd once said so, I stuck to it. You know how one does,' she added apologetically.

I could hardly believe my ears. Armorel was standing there, in her pretty dress and hat, looking as much a picture of innocence as Elsa Verity herself, and apparently quite unaware of the sensation her words were causing; but I could not credit that her innocence was really sincere.

'It was - it was most reprehensible of you, Miss Scott-Davies. Er - *most* reprehensible.' The little coroner was

obviously getting out of his depths.

‘Yes, I see that now,’ Armorel replied sadly. ‘I’m so sorry. But I’ll tell you the truth now.’

I did glance then at Superintendent Hancock. That bulky person was no longer examining the toes of his boots. His eyes were for Armorel and nothing else.

‘Well – er – what did you do next?’ asked the coroner helplessly.

‘Oh, I waited till it was all over,’ Armorel answered, perfectly unperturbed, ‘and Mr Pinkerton and the others had gone, and then I came out. Eric was just getting up from where he’d been lying, and I said to him – ’

‘One minute, Miss Scott-Davies, one minute,’ interposed the coroner hurriedly. ‘I think it is my duty, in the interests of justice, to point out to you the extreme gravity of the statement you are making. Before you say anything more, you must realize that this means that you become the last person to admit to having seen your cousin alive, and – ’

‘Well, I suppose I was,’ Armorel said calmly. ‘I’ve always known that, really. Except the person who shot him, of course. I mean, if he was shot, as the police seem to think. Personally, I don’t.’

The coroner looked for help to Superintendent Hancock. ‘Er – Superintendent, in view of this development, this highly unexpected development, would you prefer me to adjourn for today? You will doubtless have to rearrange – h’m...’

‘I think, sir,’ replied the superintendent grimly, ‘that as the witness says she is now ready to tell us the truth, we had better let her do so, before she changes her mind again.’

‘Yes,’ Armorel calmly nodded her approval. ‘I’d rather.’

I could contain myself no longer. I jumped to my feet. ‘Mr Coroner, I insist on – ’

‘Sit down, sir!’ suddenly barked the coroner, glad no doubt to have a chance of barking at all.

‘Yes, sit down, Pinkie,’ Armorel echoed. ‘I’m going to tell them, and you can’t stop me.’

‘But – ’

‘Silence!’ positively roared the little coroner, glaring round. The titters caused by Armorel’s ill-timed remark hastily subsided.

So did I, for John pulled me down most forcibly by the slack of my coat. ‘Sit down and shut up, Cyril,’ he whispered fiercely in my ear, ‘or I’ll hit you in the wind.’

The coroner turned his glare on me. ‘If you interrupt the witness again, sir, I’ll – I’ll have you removed.’

‘Shall I go on?’ said Armorel blandly.

‘If you please, Miss Scott-Davies.’

‘Well, I said to Eric, “Well done, old scout, you make a marvellous corpse,” or something silly like that, and asked him if he was coming up; and he said, “Run away, little girl; I’ve got something important to do before I go up, and it doesn’t want a third party,” or something like *that*.’

‘Do you swear to those exact words?’ asked the coroner severely.

‘Good gracious, no. I mean, that was the sort of idea.’

‘Anyhow, he gave you plainly to understand that he had something important to do?’

‘Oh, yes. In fact I think he said something about having to see a man about a dog.’

‘Silence!’ roared the coroner, and again the laughter died hurriedly away. ‘Yes?’

But Mr Gifford had already jumped up. ‘Miss Scott-Davies, can you swear that he used the expression ‘third party’? Think carefully, please.’

Armored gave an imitation (I *knew* it was an imitation) of thinking carefully. 'Ye-es. Yes, I can. I remember quite distinctly.'

'Did that give you the impression that his important business was concerned with another person? Was, in fact, in the nature of an appointment?'

'Why, yes,' Armored said, as if in surprise. 'That's exactly what it did do. So I didn't butt in, you see.'

Mr Gifford sat down, with an important little bow to the coroner.

'Then what did you do?' asked the latter.

'Well, I watched him go off, and - '

'One moment, Miss Scott-Davies. Which way did he go?'

'Why, into the other clearing, of course,' Armored said, again as if in surprise. 'At least, I suppose so. I'd never been along that particular path myself.'

'Do you mean the path on which his body was found?'

'No, no; the other one. But I can't say I paid any particular attention. It was all one to me.'

'What did you do then?'

'I started to go up alone, but a bush of wild honeysuckle caught my eye back by the stream. It was the first I'd seen out, and I knew Ethel - Mrs Hillyard - would like some, so I went back to gather it.'

'Can you tell us exactly where this honeysuckle bush was?'

'I'll try to. It is on the extreme left of the big clearing where they'd been doing the play, as one faced the stream; right by the water.'

'I see. Then it was on the other side of the clearing from the direction in which your cousin had disappeared?'

‘That’s right. Well, I don’t know if you’ve ever tried to gather wild honeysuckle, but if you have you know that a bush that looks marvellous in the distance looks quite mangy close to. This one did, so I didn’t gather any, but right on the other side I caught sight of another, so I thought – Oh, by the way, I ought to have said that the first shot went off while I was looking at the bush.’

I think everybody in the court gasped. I know I did.

‘Ah!’ said the coroner. ‘From what direction did it come?’

We hung on Armorel’s answer.

‘Oh, from the direction Eric had gone. It was quite close. Of course I thought he’d fired it himself.’

‘But surely you went to see what had happened?’

Armorel looked quite astonished. ‘Good gracious, no. If I’d gone to see what had happened every time I thought Eric had fired a shot, I should have been running about all day.’

The coroner seemed a little discomfited. ‘But you knew he hadn’t a gun with him?’

‘I didn’t know anything of the sort,’ Armorel retorted. ‘As a matter of fact I didn’t think about it at all, but if I had I should have supposed he’d taken the one that had been lying on the ground. I didn’t notice whether he had or not. I simply didn’t think about it at all.’

‘I see. Well, then, what did you do?’

‘Oh, I’d seen another honeysuckle bush on the other side, and I thought I might as well go and have a look at that too.’

It was close to the stream as well, by the path – the ordinary path along the stream, you know.’

‘But on the other side of the big clearing?’

‘Well, beyond it really. I saw it along the path. In fact it was in the bushes that separate the little clearing from the path along the stream, rather tucked in, so that I had to go

in after it. I could only see the top sticking up above the bushes from where I'd been before.'

'Perhaps you'll mark the places of these two honeysuckle bushes on this plan, Miss Scott-Davies.'

One of the policemen took the plan over to her, with a pencil, and after poring over it for a few moments Armored marked two spots on it. 'That's as near as I can remember,' she said easily.

On the coroner's direction, the plan was passed among the jury. They looked at it intently, but I doubt whether any of them learned much from it.

'Yes, Miss Scott-Davies?'

'Where had I got to? Oh, yes. The other bush. Well, I'd just reached it, when I heard someone coming down the hill. Pinkie, in fact - Mr Pinkerton.'

'Yes? What did you do?'

'Oh, nothing. I thought he'd come down to get something he'd left behind, you see. He didn't notice me.'

'Can you tell us,' said the coroner quite casually, fiddling with his pencil, 'what Mr Pinkerton did?'

Armored actually giggled. 'Yes, he - he picked a wild rose.'

'He what?'

'It's rather unfair,' Armored said, smiling most confidentially at the coroner, 'but when I saw he hadn't noticed me, I stopped in the bushes and watched him. I thought he might do something funny, you see.'

'Why did you think that?' asked the coroner gravely.

'Well, Pinkie - Mr Pinkerton is the sort of person who might do something funny, if he thought he was alone. So I watched to see if he would.'

'And did he? That is - kindly tell us exactly what Mr Pinkerton did do.'

‘Well...’ Armorel wrinkled her forehead in an obvious effort of memory. ‘I think why I hid really was because he looked so funny first of all. He came very cautiously out into the middle of the clearing, you see, looking as if he expected to be shot himself any minute, and said, “Hi!” ’

‘And that struck you as humorous?’

‘I think,’ considered Armorel, ‘that anyone saying “Hi!” all alone is funny, don’t you? And then he walked all round saying “Hi!” I was simply screaming with joy.’

‘But what about this wild rose?’ asked the coroner, frowning on the incipient titters which were breaking out again.

‘Oh, yes. When he’d finished saying “Hi!” he went up to a wild rose bush and stood looking at it as if – well, as if he were saying his prayers, you know. And then he picked one and held it out at arm’s-length, and simply gazed at it. Like a poet, or something like that. I never saw anything so funny.’

‘Yes?’ said the coroner, with a little smile himself. ‘And then?’

‘Oh, and then the second shot went off, and – and Pinkie jumped and dropped the rose.’

‘I see. Now, what did this second shot sound to you like?’

‘Oh, it was the one Mr Hillyard fired.’

‘How do you know that?’ the coroner asked sharply.

‘Well, it’s obvious,’ Armorel said in apparent surprise. ‘It was a shotgun, for one thing, and it came from exactly the direction Mr Hillyard says he was.’

‘Was it loud?’

‘Oh, no. It was some distance away. I mean, I didn’t jump.’

‘But you heard it quite distinctly?’



‘Oh, yes. Enough to say it was hollow, like a shotgun, not sharp like a rifle.’

‘You know a good deal about firearms, Miss Scott-Davies?’

‘Well, I was brought up amongst them, so to speak.’

‘I see. Now, can you throw any light on this? You heard the shot which you think Mr Hillyard fired, but he says he was unable to hear any other but his own. Can you help us to understand that?’

‘Well, I should think it’s obvious, isn’t it? He was much farther away when the first one went off and we heard the second because he’d come nearer.’

John jumped up. That’s quite correct, sir. I was walking downstream.’

‘Thank you, Mr Hillyard,’ said the coroner, with a brief nod. ‘Well, Miss Scott-Davies, continue your narrative. What happened after the second shot, and you saw Mr Pinkerton – er – jump?’

‘Oh, well, he began going round saying “Hi!” again, so I came out and told him not to be frightened.’

‘You spoke to him?’

‘Yes, that’s what I mean. And he asked me where I’d sprung from, or something like that, and I said I’d been gathering wild honeysuckle, and he asked where it was then, and I said I hadn’t gathered any after all, only a wild rose, and he blushed.’

I was so concerned with this remarkable story that the occasional laughs which punctuated it hardly reached my ears. Nor indeed, at the time, was I troubled by the ludicrous figure which I myself cut in it.

‘Yes? Go on, please.’

‘Then he went over to where Eric had been lying, to get his cigarette case, and said Mrs Fitzwilliam was waiting for him, and he must hurry; so I told him to get on with it.’

‘You did not offer to accompany him?’

‘No. He didn’t ask me, and it might have been rather butting in, mightn’t it? I went off along the path by the stream, thinking probably I’d meet Mr Hillyard or someone, and up the hill farther on.’

‘You didn’t see Mr Pinkerton descend again?’

‘No, but he told me afterwards that when he found Mrs Fitzwilliam gone he came back to look for me.’

‘Yes, never mind that. Well, Miss Scott-Davies, I don’t know what to say to you. Really I don’t. I can only imagine you cannot have realized the very great importance of what you have just told us.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ Armored said, with (no doubt) charming penitence. ‘You see, all I thought was that it would probably save an awful lot of bother and fuss if I told the superintendent later that I’d been reading on the hill all the time, as he thought. And when I came out from seeing him that afternoon, I just mentioned to Mr Pinkerton that I had said that, and he was to back me up. And of course he did.’

‘You seem to take it very much for granted that he should assist you in deceiving the police.’

‘Well, I did think it was rather sporting of him. In fact, I thought he was making almost as much fuss about it as the police might if I’d told them the truth, because whenever I saw him during the next two days he always kept rubbing it in that I must stick to the story, and now I’d told them that I mustn’t go back on it or I’d get into trouble, and whatever happened I mustn’t come out with the truth now. I got quite bored.’

‘Ah, Mr Pinkerton insisted on that, did he?’

‘Yes. Of course when I heard what happened here this morning and the rotten position it put him in, I knew I must

tell the truth. I realized then how silly it was of me not to have told it sooner.'

'And why,' asked the coroner gently, 'do you imagine Mr Pinkerton advised you so strongly to stick to your story?'

Armored actually laughed. 'Why, there's only one reason, isn't there? He must have thought I'd shot Eric myself. It's just the sort of ridiculous idea Pinkie - Mr Pinkerton, I mean, would get hold of.'

'I see. Thank you, Miss Scott-Davies.' The coroner looked undecided, and glanced towards Mr Gifford.

He rose. 'Have I your permission to put a few questions to the witness?'

'Certainly, Mr Gifford. Certainly.'

I rose too. 'Mr Coroner, before Mr Gifford does so, I ask you earnestly to let me give further evidence. I have carefully refrained from interrupting, despite the utmost provocation, but the evidence I wish to give is of the utmost importance.'

'Your request is most irregular, Mr Pinkerton,' temporized the coroner.

'Oh, *do* sit down, Pinkie,' said Armored clearly. 'I told you I was going to tell them the truth. Don't begin muddling things up again.'

I had to disregard her, and kept my eyes on the coroner.

'Very well. If you really think you can assist this inquiry by doing so. Miss Scott-Davies, will you stand down for a moment?'

Armored had no option but to withdraw. As she did so she said: 'For heaven's sake, Pinkie, don't make more of an ass of yourself than you can help. '

I disregarded that too, and the laugh that followed it.

'You wish to say -' prompted the coroner.

‘I wish to say,’ I replied calmly, in spite of the tumult of my feelings, ‘that the evidence which Miss Scott-Davies has just given is untrue in every particular. I did not see her on the occasion she mentions, we had no conversation, to the best of my knowledge she was on the hillside the whole time, and so far am I from suspecting that she shot her cousin that the truth is that she suspects that I shot him, and has invented this complete fabrication in order to shield me. That is all I wish to say, with the earnest request that you take no account of her story at all.’

‘I see,’ said the coroner, though I do not think he did.

‘Oh, Lord, Pinkie,’ I heard Armorel wail, ‘You see,’ she added to the coroner, ‘he really does suspect me. That’s why he’s trying to shield me. Can’t you *make* him speak the truth?’

This is all most irregular,’ sighed the little coroner, with whom in other circumstances I might have felt sympathy.

Mr Gifford suddenly popped up. ‘With your permission, sir – Mr Pinkerton, you heard the last witness describe how you plucked a wild rose. Did you or did you not pluck a wild rose during that period?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘You swear to that?’

‘I do.’

‘Oh, Pinkie!’ came a reproachful *sotto voce* from Armorel.

‘And you, Miss Scott-Davies, swear that Mr Pinkerton did so, and dropped it when the second shot was fired?’

‘Yes, as if it had suddenly pricked him.’

‘You can show us on the plan exactly where Mr Pinkerton was standing at the time?’

‘Well, not exactly; near enough.’

Mr Gifford turned to the coroner. 'Then I suggest that Superintendent Hancock be recalled and asked if the police at any time found a rose at, or near, the spot that Miss Scott-Davies indicated.'

The coroner brightened. 'An excellent suggestion. You have the plan there? Now, Superintendent, can you tell us that?'

'I can tell you at once, sir, that we didn't find a wild rose anywhere; but that doesn't say there wasn't one. We weren't looking for wild roses. But if it was there, it should be there still. With your permission I'll take Miss Scott-Davies with me at once and look, in the place she indicates.'

'Exactly. Admirable.'

'It's a complete waste of time, sir,' I warned him.

'That will do, Mr Pinkerton,' he returned, with unnecessary severity. 'You may stand down. In the meantime we will hear the next witness. Mrs - er - yes, Mrs Fitzwilliam, please.'

I resumed my seat between Ethel and John. I will say nothing of the state of my feelings.

Somehow I managed to focus my attention on the evidence Mrs Fitzwilliam was giving. She had little of importance to say, beyond confirming my own testimony that the first shot sounded near and the second much farther away, and that she had heard me shouting below. She had not heard the sound of voices.

Her evidence was completed by the time Armorel and the superintendent returned.

Without a word the superintendent, looking grimmer than ever, marched up to the coroner and laid something on the table in front of him. I gazed at it in stupefaction. It was faded, bruised, and crushed, but indubitably it was the remains of a wild rose.

The coroner directed it to be given to the jury, and while they were examining it whispered with the superintendent.

I felt that a vital moment was slipping past me, but I could not decide what to do. I looked searchingly at Armored, but she was talking and smiling with Mrs Fitzwilliam.

'I shall now,' said the coroner in a loud voice, 'adjourn the court till three days' time. Eleven o'clock on Thursday morning, please, gentlemen of the jury. All witnesses must attend, including those who have given evidence already.'

'Pest!' I heard Morton Harrogate Bradley remark quite audibly. 'That means we've got to come over again.'

We passed into the sunshine outside.

## chapter thirteen

'Well, anyhow, it seems that *you* don't need me any longer,' Sheringham said. 'You're cleared.'

'But I keep telling you that the story was a fabrication from beginning to end,' I replied, with no little exasperation. Really, Sheringham was being very difficult.

'I know you do. In fact, Tapers, you protest too much. If you didn't, I might have believed you; as it is, I'm beginning to share the official opinion that Armorel's story is true.'

I passed over his unwarranted use of Miss Scott-Davies' Christian name, though in my state of irritation it annoyed me considerably. 'I denied it on oath,' I said coldly.

'I know you did. And the chief constable told me he considered it a dam' sporting piece of perjury. Most unofficial remark. But then I've often noticed that chief constables are unofficial. Much more so than their superintendents. Now Hancock is merely cross with Armorel for spoiling his pretty case against you.'

'But she hasn't spoiled it, if I continue to insist that she is not speaking the truth.'

Sheringham made a foolish grimace. 'Really, Tapers, I can't understand you. You wire for me to come down here and get you out of a mess, and when someone else very kindly does it for you, much more effectually than I could, you scream and kick and refuse your oats. Do you *want* to put a rope round your neck?'

'What I want or do not want is my own affair.'

‘Well, I’m glad it isn’t mine,’ Sheringham said dryly, ‘because you certainly don’t seem to know what it is. In fact, my good Tapers, what you really want is a jolly good kicking, such as I seem to remember having administered to you once or twice in the days of our childhood, to knock a bit of sense into you. It’s remarkable how they improved you. Remember?’

I disregarded this offensive irrelevancy. ‘If the worst comes to the worst, I am prepared to admit in open court, under oath, that I *did* shoot Scott-Davies,’ I replied, perhaps angrily. ‘Kindly remember that.’

‘Very well,’ returned Sheringham, with maddening equanimity. ‘The perfect little hero. Very pretty. They’ll probably clap you. But they won’t believe you, you know. Oh, dear me, no; not for a moment.’

‘And why not?’

‘Because Armorel told her story far too well – whether it was truth or fancy. You didn’t cut a desperate figure at all in it; you cut a comic one. She made you out a figure of fun, and there’s no bigger step than from the desperate to the comic. If she really was inventing, that was a stroke of genius. Everyone saw at once, you see, that to suspect funny old Tapers, who says his prayers to wild roses and jumps when a gun goes off in the distance, of committing a cold-blooded murder was simply too ludicrous. Out of the question, altogether apart from the alibi she gave you.’

‘Certainly it was not a pleasant experience, being laughed at in public.’

‘No, but it’s better than being hanged in private,’ retorted Sheringham with asperity. ‘Good God, man, surely you haven’t got a mind as petty as all that. Aren’t you grateful to the girl? You ought to be following her about on your knees with gratitude, if you *are* telling the truth and she wasn’t.’



‘Look here, Sheringham,’ I burst out, ‘if you persist in being offensive, there is no use in continuing this conversation. I am very much indebted to you for coming down so promptly; and now, as you point out, that I am cleared, I must manage the affair in my own way. The question of my gratitude to Miss Scott-Davies, or the reverse, hardly concerns us at the moment.’

It was after dinner the same evening. Sheringham had arrived extremely late for the meal, when the rest of us had nearly finished. He had not vouchsafed any explanation at the time, but had told me since that he had been having a long conversation with Colonel Grace, the chief constable, who (in Sheringham’s words) ‘over a couple of gin-and-bitters had become most gratifyingly expansive’. We were now discussing the situation alone in the study, John having placed the room at our disposal and withdrawn.

Sheringham looked at me critically. I had spoken with unwonted heat, but he did not seem to take my words at all amiss. Instead he looked at me with such cool interest that my anger began to abate into uneasiness.

‘Yes,’ he said calmly. ‘I see. You’re frightened, on Armorel’s behalf. Of course. Damned silly of me not to realize that before. You think that in pulling your head out of the noose she’s in danger of having put her own in. Well, she is, of course; we needn’t disguise the fact. Are you in love with her, Tapers?’

‘Don’t be so infernally impertinent!’

‘You are,’ returned Sheringham coolly. ‘Well, I should jolly well think so. She must be a girl in a million to do a thing like that. Now don’t shout at me any more, Tapers, because I’m going to review the situation for you quite impartially. Control your temper and don’t interrupt, and I’ll give you the detached point of view; you ought to find it interesting.’

‘Now, the police believe her story, for more than one reason. She made you out a fool, which was so convincing (no, don’t bristle; it’s the truth). She made herself out a fool too, a dear little innocent wide-eyed fool, which may not have been so convincing to the police but certainly was to the coroner and the public; she took them in. Then, she gave the sort of detail which sounds exactly like the truth and would need a really remarkable power of invention to fabricate, such as the business with the wild rose and the walking round and saying “Hi!” And finally there is the evidence of the wild rose itself – which incidentally you haven’t yet explained. Her inventions, you see, convince because they’re in character. Consequently the police (who always knew the thinness of their case against you) now believe that you were deliberately shielding the girl, at the cost of possibly considerable unpleasantness to yourself; and, to pay you a compliment for a change, Tapers, they consider that in character too.

‘Well, I needn’t tell you that it took them exactly two seconds to ask themselves: *Why* have you been shielding her? The answer of course is obvious, even if she hadn’t supplied it: because you thought she’d shot her cousin. And, we’ll add, justifiably, but that doesn’t concern the police.

So having removed one suspect from them, Armored in the same breath very kindly presents them with another; and we can’t imagine that they’ll be slow to follow up her suggestion.

‘Furthermore, we can make the point here that even if the police didn’t believe her story, they know their case against you is gone. If she is prepared to repeat that story at the assizes, they wouldn’t have one chance in a million of conviction. And, so far as we know, they’ve no rebutting evidence at all. It’s simply one word against another. Even if you were prepared to gratify them by admitting in the witness box that you shot the man, as you suggest, the jury

would acquit you on her story without leaving the box and give you a hearty rousing cheer into the bargain. The police won't touch you now.

'But that doesn't say they won't touch her; because they're pretty sure it was murder, and they want their victim. So do you still want me to pack up and go home, Tapers? Or shall I go on?'

My nervous anger had gone. Sheringham had been quite right. It had been prompted by sheer fear – indeed, terror. For if I had been frightened on my own account, on Armorel's I was now terrified. What had the dear, misguided girl done? She had avoided me since the inquest, but I had been able to ask her, on the way home, in a hurried aside, why she had done such a thing, and she had replied, almost angrily: 'My God, what do you take me for? Do you think I'd let you do a thing like that for me, and then leave you in the lurch, you idiot? You make me tired.' She had then hastily joined the others, and I had been unable to see her alone since. Armorel really was a baffling person.

'Yes,' I said to Sheringham now. 'Go on, please. Why are the police sure it's murder?'

'Poor old Tapers,' Sheringham said, with a sympathy that I could not resent; indeed, unaccustomed though I have always been to rely upon others, I found it unexpectedly welcome. 'Still, remember there's no more case against her than there was against you, – *yet*: motive and opportunity, that's all, and the latter on her own admission only. Not much for the police to work on.

'As to their idea about murder, I didn't say they were sure; only that they were pretty sure. They still admit the bare possibility of accident. But there are two very nasty pointers towards murder. The first is the path of the bullet, which is practically horizontal through the body; that indicates of course that the rifle was about level with the place of entry,

and parallel with the ground – in other words, that it was fired in the usual way from the shoulder, and from the shoulder of someone several inches shorter than Scott-Davies.'

'Isn't that rather splitting hairs?' I demurred.

'Certainly not. It's a very reasonable, not to say obvious, assumption. And the second snag is the absence of powder marks. That's most significant. If he really had been dragging the thing along behind him by the muzzle, you see, there couldn't have been more than a couple of feet at the most for the bullet to travel before entering the body.'

'And would that leave powder marks?' I asked doubtfully. 'A little .22?'

'Well, traces of smoke, rather than powder, perhaps, but quite unmistakable. I saw some tests; this particular cartridge fired at squares of white cardboard at different distances. The smoke is visible up to about four and a half feet.'

'White cardboard, yes, but it wouldn't be visible on a tweed coat.'

Sheringham smiled. 'My dear Tapers, you'd better not try your hand at murder after all. You don't know much about modern crime detection if you imagine that what's there can't be found, visible to the human eye or not. The coat Scott-Davies was wearing was sent up to Scotland Yard at once for examination. The report is that there are no traces of powder on it. That's almost conclusive that the muzzle was at least five feet away from the coat when the trigger was pulled.'

'Then there's the penetration of the bullet. The tests for that of course can't be nearly so exact, but they confirm the same conclusion. And the other limit the police gauge from these is sixteen feet. In other words, the muzzle of the gun

was between five and sixteen feet away from Scott-Davies' back.

'And lastly there's another pointer towards murder, a third, though not so decisive. Armorel said definitely that her cousin mentioned an appointment. Nobody's come forward with any story of such an appointment. That's significant, to say the least. And what's more, it's a point which passes by both you and her - about the only one that does.'

'It doesn't occur to you,' I said thoughtfully, 'that if all her story of her interview with me was a fabrication, that of her interview with her cousin might be equally so?'

'No, it doesn't,' Sheringham retorted. 'For the simple reason that though she might have an interest in inventing the first, she could have none in inventing the other.'

'I see,' was all I said.

'One last piece of news about the police. It'll relieve you perhaps to hear that they're not making a dead set at your young woman by any means. She's now only the chief of two or three possible suspects. For instance, I may as well tell you that they know all about the De Ravels, and her relations with Scott-Davies.'

'They do?' I said in surprise.

'Yes. Not unnaturally, since it's been the gossip of that set in London for the last year apparently, as you yourself said. And that means, of course, that they've seen through the significance of your little play.'

'You seem to have persuaded the police to take you very fully into their confidence, Sheringham.'

'I did,' Sheringham grinned. 'The colonel, as I said, became most charmingly expansive. After all, the poor man only wants to get at the truth, which is reasonable enough; and he imagines, quite rightly, that I want the same thing.'

Furthermore, he doesn't want to call in Scotland Yard. So he saw no reason for not putting his cards on the table. Very right and proper. But I made no promise to put mine down in return. So have no fears, Tapers; the contract remains inviolate, and those interesting footprints, those remarkably interesting footprints, remain a secret.'

'Indeed they don't,' I retorted.

'What?' Sheringham exclaimed. 'You mean, the police have found them?'

'No, I don't,' I smiled, pleased at the ease with which I had scored off the redoubtable Sheringham. 'I mean that they don't remain at all. I've trodden them out.'

Sheringham stared at me. Then he whistled. 'Whew! Then Armored's story *was* true. And you do suspect her.'

'Certainly not,' I replied indignantly. 'Nothing of the kind. That is a quite unwarranted deduction.'

'I disagree. In fact, I should call it obvious. You must think her position very serious if you're prepared to go to the length of destroying evidence against her.'

'That doesn't follow at all,' I retorted hotly. Indeed, I was much upset at this travesty of my motive. 'I might have had several reasons without – without that one. Besides, you don't know that those footprints were evidence against her at all. They were equal evidence against any woman.'

Sheringham looked at me pityingly. 'Really, Tapers, do you imagine I should leave such a remarkable piece of evidence as those prints, and in a case where positive evidence is so scarce, *and* in a place where cattle wander at will, without taking any precautions at all? As you do seem to think so, let me tell you that I measured those prints most carefully, that I drew as exact a diagram of the best-defined one as I could, that they are the prints of a woman's four-and-a-half shoes, and that I took the opportunity of the inquest this morning to examine a pair of Armored's outdoor shoes and

found they corresponded exactly with my outline. Moreover, although they're destroyed I'm a witness to their existence, and I have the diagram; and in view of the connection I've had with Scotland Yard the police would certainly accept my word without hesitation that they did exist, to which fact, moreover, I should be a competent witness in court. So tell me what you're going to do about that, Tapers? Push me over a handy cliff? It's the only way if you really want to suppress all knowledge of those footprints.'

I stared at him in apprehension. 'You don't mean you contemplate telling the police about them, Sheringham? That's impossible. You couldn't be such a cad. You gave your word.'

'Not at all,' he replied coolly. 'I expressly made the reservation that I be permitted to use my own judgment. And as for being a cad, as you so charmingly suggest, there is such a thing as duty too, you know. I may consider it my duty to tell the police what I know. After all, if Armored did shoot her cousin there's only one motive, isn't there? And not by any means a noble one. To get hold of Stukeleigh. If that turned out to be the case - well - ' He shrugged his shoulders.

'How dare you make such a suggestion?' I fear I raised my voice. 'It's - it's infamous. I won't permit it, Sheringham.'

He looked at me searchingly. 'I'm afraid you'll have to, Tapers, because it's the conclusion to which I'm being driven. You may as well know now as later.' He paused. 'I'm seriously wondering whether I'll speak to the police or not.'

I looked at him. Clearly he meant what he said.

I made a terrible decision. 'There's no need for you to do that, Sheringham,' I said quietly. 'I'd rather tell you the truth here and now. I shot Scott-Davies.'

Our steady looks challenged each other. 'You make that statement in all seriousness, knowing what the

consequences may be?' Sheringham asked.

'Perfectly,' I replied and, leaning back in my chair, smiled at him. Once again, I felt strangely at ease, as in court that morning after I had given up hope.

'I shall have to report it to the police, you know.'

'Of course.'

There was a short silence between us.

Then the door opened softly, and we both looked round. It was Armorel.

'My poor Pinkie,' she said, half-affectionately, and half-contemptuously, 'you can't even confess convincingly. Well, how could you, poor lamb?' She turned to Sheringham. 'All right, Mr Sheringham. You win. Yes, I shot him all right. But not to get hold of Stukeleigh. You got that wrong - if you did really, and it wasn't part of the game. It was partly because he was going to sell Stukeleigh, and partly because it'd be so much better for so many people if he was dead. By the way, how did you know I was listening?'

These wooden ceilings,' Sheringham murmured, in a deprecatory tone. 'And as I could even hear you brushing your hair just now - You did brush your hair, didn't you?'

'Yes, I did,' Armorel replied equably, sitting on the arm of a chair. 'Well, what are you going to do about it? Give me away, eh?'

'This is - this is ridiculous,' I managed to gasp, wondering if I was going mad. 'I - I - '

'Yes, and so are you,' returned Armorel, not at all kindly. 'No, don't say any more. You spoke up your piece like a good boy, just as Mr Sheringham wanted you to. Don't spoil it.'

'And how did you know I did want him to?' Sheringham asked her. 'That was clever of you.'



‘Was it?’ Armorel said indifferently. ‘I heard you egging him on, of course; and it wasn’t long before I realized you were talking at me. So I thought I’d better oblige.’

‘Well, and so there we are,’ Sheringham laughed – actually laughed. ‘It certainly was a pretty trap, though I says it as shouldn’t. Tapers fell into it because he didn’t see it, and you because you did. Anyhow, we know where we are now.’

‘Indeed,’ I had to put in, ‘I cannot agree. Miss Scott-Davies has just made the most preposterous – ’

‘Yes, yes,’ Sheringham rudely cut me short. ‘You’ve both confessed to the murder. That means that each of you suspects the other – as I thought. And *that* means that neither of you did it. And so, as I say, we know at last where we are – or rather, I do. Somebody else did it. The only question now is, who?’

‘And why not leave it at that?’ Armorel remarked carelessly. ‘Personally, I don’t care. But knowing Eric, I’m sure there was a very good reason.’

I began to see daylight at last. ‘Ah!’ I said ‘I understand. It was a ruse. And you do realize at last, Sheringham, that Miss Scott-Davies’ story this morning was an invention?’

They both looked at me, and then at each other; then, for some totally inexplicable reason, they began to laugh. I could only raise my eyebrows in silence.

‘Poor angel,’ giggled Armorel. ‘He is rather sweet, isn’t he? Still, never mind. What do you think about it, Mr Sheringham? Why not leave it at that?’

Sheringham shook his head. ‘No. Much too untidy. I shouldn’t be able to sleep for weeks. Besides, the police won’t, you know.’

‘No,’ Armorel agreed calmly. ‘They’ll be like a pack of hounds on my trail now, I suppose.’

‘Nonsense!’ I said loudly. ‘Sooner than that, I shall – ’

‘Pinkie, if you interrupt again I shall come and sit on your knee; and that’ll make you feel so silly, in front of Mr Sheringham. You know it will, so do be quiet. Well, Mr Sheringham?’

‘Well, we seem to be confronted with much the same problem over again, with you this time instead of Tapers. He’s cleared, and you’re not. If you postulate the same conditions as he did, our job is to clear you without incriminating someone else. Is that the idea?’

Armored nodded. ‘Yes. The police can suspect me as much as they like. I don’t care about that, but - ’

‘They shall do nothing of the sort,’ I exclaimed. Really, it was too absurd. ‘Sooner than that they should suspect you for a minute, I will - Armored!’

‘I warned you,’ Armored laughed lightly, apparently quite unembarrassed by the equivocal picture we must have presented. ‘And the next time, I shall kiss you. And you’ll blush even more than you do now. - He *is* blushing prettily, isn’t he, Mr Sheringham?’

‘Yes, I love to see modesty nowadays in the young middle-aged,’ Sheringham said foolishly.

They both looked at me. It was most embarrassing. But I did not care to use force to a woman, and there seemed no other means of dislodging Armored. I leaned back and smiled, as if indifferent; though I fear it was a feeble pretence.

‘By the way,’ Sheringham said suddenly, ‘there’s one very promising line of inquiry which seems to have been unaccountably neglected. At least, it doesn’t appear to have occurred to the police, so naturally I didn’t suggest it.’

‘Oh?’ said Armored. ‘What?’

‘Why, Elsa Verity. According to what I’ve been told, she was in the far end of the wood - Bluebell Wood, isn’t it? -

when the thing happened. Well, no one seems to have asked her which way she came back to the house. I've been over all the ground today, and there are two ways from Bluebell Wood, either straight up and through the fields, or else along the stream and up the path that Tapers and Mrs Fitzwilliam followed. So it's even chances which way she came. Now if by any chance she did come along the stream, she may have seen something. At any rate, it's worth a few questions.'

Armored looked dubious. 'Is it? I doubt if you'll get much out of Elsa.'

'No, indeed,' I had to agree. 'I regret to say that Miss Verity is - well, very small reliance can be placed upon her word.'

It was an unfortunate remark. Armored at once began to laugh. Sheringham of course inquired the reason, and in spite of my protests Armored told him of the way in which Miss Verity had succeeded in hoodwinking me. Once again I was surprised by the positive malice with which Armored recounted the story. Indeed, she went so far as to hint that Elsa had by her duplicity interested me to the extent of real affection, which was very far from the case.

'I see,' Sheringham grinned. 'I shall have to be very subtle. But she can caricature me behind my back as much as she likes, so long as I get what I want out of her; in other words, the truth. And talking of the truth, Armored - '

'Meaning me?' interposed Armored quickly, to my secret pleasure.

'That *is* your name, isn't it?' Sheringham smiled, quite unabashed. 'But I'll call you Miss Scott-Davies if you're really young enough to like it better.'

'Cunning, aren't you? All right, stick to Armored.'

'Certainly. Well, talking of the truth, Armored, there's one point on which I must press you. You remember quoting

your cousin as making a reference to an appointment with somebody. I needn't emphasize the importance of that, if it's true. What I want to know is, is it? Did he really say anything of the kind, or didn't he? You'll save me a lot of wild-goosechasing if he didn't, and you tell me so here and now.'

'Oh, yes,' Armorel replied easily. 'He did. But of course I can't remember the exact words. It was something about - '

'He didn't!' I interposed, 'For the plain reason that Armorel wasn't anywhere in the - *Armored!*' I fear the last exclamation was somewhat smothered.

'I warned you,' Armorel muttered, also in smothered tones. 'You can't say I didn't warn you. Keep *still*, Pinkie, will you?'

'Sic him, Armored!' that idiot Sheringham encouraged her.

'*Armored!*' I could only protest, feebly.

'Well, well, well!' said a voice from the door. 'Cyril, I wouldn't have believed it of you.'

To my relief Armored sat up. 'Oh, John, do speak to Pinkie. He's been *such* a caveman. He dragged me onto his knee, and began kissing me like anything. And all in front of Mr Sheringham. Didn't you hear my screams?'

'Yes, quite deafening,' John saw fit to grin. 'Ethel thought it was a mouse. Well, don't let me interrupt you, Cyril. I only came in to say that the rest of us are going to bed. Put out the lights, if you're sitting up longer.'

'On the contrary,' I said, 'I think it's time we all went up. '

'I warn you, Pinkie,' Armored remarked, getting up and smoothing down her dress, 'I shall lock my door.'

Really, I was not sorry to escape upstairs. Sheringham came too. Armored, however, remarked that she was far too excited over being a police suspect to think of bed; she was

going into the drawing room to read an improving book for an hour or two. She undertook to turn out the lamps.

It was with a strange mixture of feelings that I found myself at last alone. Intense relief at realizing myself safe from the attentions of the police mingled with the determination that I would not allow my immunity to be bought at the price of Armorel herself becoming suspect. As to my paramount emotion, of intense and overwhelming gratitude to the dear girl for the incredible generosity of her action of that morning, I cannot trust myself even now to write temperately.

But in truth I did not know what to do. At one moment I told myself that I could not possibly accept such a gift; at another, that if only Sheringham could clear her name as effectually as she had cleared mine, it would be possible for me to do so. But that he could do so, without involving some third person in the tangle, seemed out of the question. I was very much distressed; and to add to my uneasiness was the conviction that I had been churlish towards Armorel. I had seemed to take her wonderful sacrifice for granted; certainly I had not thanked her adequately – if indeed adequate thanks were possible, which they were not. And she was ready even to go to the length of pretending to have shot her cousin, on my behalf!

I had thrown myself into a chair and was still debating, fully dressed, these matters, when there was the faintest tap at my door and Sheringham immediately followed it into my room, in his pyjamas and dressing gown.

‘Just a few last words with you, Tapers, really alone and unoverheard,’ he said in a low voice, drawing a chair up beside mine.

‘I’m glad you came,’ I agreed at once. ‘I am exceedingly worried, Sheringham. What am I to do? Please advise me. I cannot let that poor girl continue in this attitude, if it means

that she is in danger; and yet you say no one will believe me however much I deny the truth of her story – not even if I state that I shot Scott-Davies myself. What am I to do?’

‘That’s just what I’ve come to tell you,’ Sheringham replied cheerfully. ‘Look here, am I to take it that you’d go to any lengths to save her?’

‘Good gracious, yes. Most certainly I would.’

‘Well, first of all, then, realize this, Tapers. The police have only got one witness against her, just one – and that’s you. According to her story, you saw her come from the direction, or the general direction, in which her cousin was already lying dead. In clearing you, she’s made you a witness against herself.’

‘But I shall deny it. I never saw her at all, let alone in any particular direction. How can I be a witness against her, if I give totally contradictory evidence?’

‘It seems to me that if you give any evidence at all, you’ll do her harm; because if, as you say, you deny her story, the court may well assume that there’s a conspiracy between you to clear each other. That you conspired, to put it bluntly, to kill Scott-Davies between you, and clear each other afterwards.’

‘That is precisely what I told her, though I considered it a prevarication at the time, when the dear girl offered to – ’ I broke off in some confusion.

But Sheringham persisted; and as the incident after all only added fresh credit to Armored, I told him how she had offered actually to marry me, if I thought it advisable.

To my surprise Sheringham did not smile indulgently. Instead he said at once: ‘Then she showed more sense than you. Tapers, it was to suggest that very thing to you that I’ve come along now.’

‘Sheringham!’ I exclaimed, in astonishment.

‘Listen,’ he said rapidly. ‘The two of you are bound up in this. You can incriminate each other, you can clear each other, you can give evidence for or against each other. But what you both want is not to have to give evidence at all. You don’t want her to perjure herself on your behalf; she doesn’t want you to do your best to spoil the results of her perjury. And remember this: that without the inculpatory evidence of the other, the police have no real case against either of you: only suspicion. I don’t see how they can possibly arrest either of you now, after her story, unless they can call the other in support of their case. Obviously, therefore, it’s up to you two to make it *impossible* for the police to do anything of the sort. And there are only the two ways of achieving that: you must both be either dead, or married. And I’m not advocating a suicide pact.’

‘Good gracious me,’ I could only gasp. ‘But – ’

‘Yes?’

‘But you must see that – ’

‘What?’

‘Well,’ I said, in acute embarrassment, ‘it would be most unfair, that she should have to suffer for – Really,

Sheringham, I mean – ’ I had seldom found myself at such a disadvantage.

‘Are you sure she would suffer?’ Sheringham merely smiled.

‘I – don’t quite understand.’

‘Tapers, tell me the truth. Don’t get on your hind legs, and push your chest out and pant; just tell me the truth. Are you fond of this girl or are you not?’

It will scarcely be believed, but I was past resenting this extraordinary interference in my private affairs. ‘I don’t know,’ I said unhappily.

‘Then think. I needn’t remind you that you’ve already gone to the length of confessing to murder, to rescue her from suspicion.’

But, still more strangely, I had no need to think. As soon as I had spoken, I had known that I was lying. I did know. To my astonishment it came upon me that I *was* fond of Armorel – intensely fond. I wanted to be with her a great deal. Indeed, all the time. I had thought I was merely exceedingly grateful, but it was not only that. I was (I could hardly credit the notion, but I was convinced it was correct) actually in *love* with Armorel.

The reader must not think that I jumped to this astonishing conclusion without at once confirming it. I hastily applied certain tests, which put the issue beyond doubt. Did I wish to kiss Armorel again? Indubitably I did. Would I enjoy exhibiting my stamp collection to her, and teaching her how to distinguish between rarer kinds of wild mosses? I should. Could I contemplate with equanimity the idea of sharing a bedroom with her? It was a disturbing thought, but I fancied I could. Could I bear with her less pleasant habits, her untidiness, her tendency towards stridency when excited, her slanginess, and the rest, until such time as I gently moulded them into ways more befitting the young chatelaine of Stukeleigh? I was sure of it; and the idea of transforming her untamed wildness thus was a singularly pleasing one.

These thoughts passed very rapidly through my mind, so that it was still in a tone of considerable surprise that I answered Sheringham: ‘Yes, I am fond of her.’

‘I should think so,’ he said severely.

Something in his voice struck me as ominous. I realized what it was. Armorel, as he himself had said, was a girl in a million; only too plainly I saw that now; but was I a man in a million? With unwonted clarity I perceived that I was not. I



was not even, perhaps, a man in a thousand – perhaps not even in a hundred. There was, in fact, every reason why I should be fond of Armorel, but none at all why she should be fond of me. It was a highly distressing thought.

My face fell. ‘What,’ I asked Sheringham humbly, ‘am I to do about it?’

‘Ask her to marry you, of course.’

‘But she wouldn’t contemplate such a thing,’ I assured him. ‘Why should she? You must see yourself that she wouldn’t. A – a high-spirited young girl, and a – well, I must confess that I have become exceedingly set in my ways. No,’ I added sadly, ‘looking at myself frankly, I can see no attraction in me at all for a high-spirited girl like Armorel.’

‘But I thought the high-spirited young girl had already proposed marriage to you?’

‘That was quite different,’ I had to point out. ‘That was merely the prompting of her generous nature.’

Sheringham shifted in his chair and recrossed his legs.

‘Tapers, these evidences of humility are most welcome, because to tell you the truth I’d come to the conclusion that you’d turned into about as conceited a little prig as ever I met, and ever since I came here I’ve been simply longing to introduce my toes once more to your hinder parts. I’m glad to learn I was wrong. But I still agree with you in wondering what the devil the girl can see in you. However, that’s her affair, not mine.

‘In the meantime let me tell you this. If a high-spirited young woman proposes marriage to you one minute, from whatever generous motives, and gets up the next in the witness box and perjures herself black and blue on your behalf, it isn’t merely out of gratitude to you for, as she thinks, neatly removing her cousin. It’s because she looks on you as her own blue-eyed boy. So I don’t think you need have much fear on that head.’

'You mean – you don't mean that Armorel is *fond* of me?' I could only gasp.

'God help the girl, I do. And at this very moment she's waiting in the drawing room for you to come down and tell her what a dam' fine girl she is, and what you're going to do about it.'

'This – this is most remarkable.'

'It is. And you're an uncommonly lucky fellow. It's never too late to be mended, and that girl will make a man of you if anyone can. So down you go, and good luck to her.'

'You advise me – Sheringham, you advise me to – to ask her to marry me?'

'I do. And at once, before the police clap one of you into jail. Tomorrow. You can slip off in the car with her directly after breakfast, and get an extra-special licence. One of the same-day excursions. It'll cost you a lot of money, but I'll lend you that. And I'll give you an introduction to the bishop, to make sure of it.'

'You know – the bishop?' I stammered. The whole world seemed to be becoming unreal.

'Like a brother,' Sheringham replied confidently. 'He eats out of my hand. I'll ask you both to dinner one day, and show you. Well, run along down.'

'I suppose I'd better,' I said. A strange diffidence was rapidly coming over me. It seemed quite impossible that Armorel could... 'I – I think I see how to approach the point. I shall inform her that we have been discussing the matter, and have arrived at the conclusions that in our joint interests – hers and mine – the marriage she herself suggested has become – er – advisable, and if she will therefore do me such a great honour I – ouch!'

The last word is an expression of pain. I had been walking slowly towards the door as I spoke, and Sheringham had

actually taken advantage of the unwitting target I offered to kick me sharply. I hurriedly turned around, to see him contemplating me with a face of disgust. I was never so taken aback in my life.

‘You miserable tapeworm!’ he exclaimed. ‘You’ll do nothing of the sort. You’ll make one stride towards that girl, grab her with both hands, and say: “Armored, you’re the most wonderful girl in the world. For the pity of Mike, marry me. Tomorrow! I can’t live another day without you.” That’s what you’ll say.’

‘You really advise something like that?’ I asked anxiously, oblivious even of the kick I had just received. ‘But supposing she says no? Supposing she laughs?’

I am sorry to say that Sheringham replied with an expression that was merely coarse.

Somehow I found myself propelled out of the room, and down the stairs.

On the way, my mouth became entirely denuded of saliva, my knees began to shake, and the pit of my abdomen seemed to become entirely hollow. Presumably I noted these phenomena for future consideration, for I remember them clearly, but at the moment I was quite incapable of considering anything.

Armored was lying on the sofa, but she was not reading; instead she was staring up at the ceiling, and she did not turn her head even as I entered. I remember shutting the door behind me with extreme care.

In the middle of the room I halted. ‘Er – Armored!’ I managed to say, though speech was difficult by reason of the strange state of my mouth.

‘Hullo, Pinkie?’ she replied, in rather a sad, tired, dispirited sort of voice.

What was it that Sheringham had said? Don't on my life do this, but do that. But which? Something about grabbing her. Grabbing her! *Grabbing* Armorel!

I took an uncertain step towards her. She turned her head slowly, and looked at me.

And upon my life I simply do not know what happened after that. Armorel says... But no; I shall not write down what Armorel says.

It is enough to say here that we decided to obtain Sheringham's introductory letter to the bishop first thing in the morning, even if it meant waking him up at seven o'clock.

I retired to bed at three o'clock in the morning in a state of unparalleled exhilaration.

## **chapter fourteen**

The reader will forgive the way in which I seem to have obtruded my private affairs on his notice, for really they became inextricably enmeshed in the story which I set out to write. I shall endeavour not to refer to them henceforth more than is quite necessary.

In spite of the very late hour, then, at which I had gone to bed, I was up again soon after seven. Nor did I hesitate to rouse Sheringham and tell him my joyful news. And I must say that when at last I had succeeded in waking him (by the application in the end of a cold wet sponge to his face), he was profuse in his congratulations, though he did seem to allocate rather too large a share of the responsibility for the happy event to himself; to hear him preening himself, one would have thought that he had actually forced me to propose to Armorel against my own worse judgment. I informed him that he had better write his letter to the bishop before breakfast, and made my way downstairs.

It was a lovely morning, and the sun was inviting. I went out of the house and paused in the garden, glancing up at Armorel's window. To my delight I perceived the dear girl herself leaning out of it, and on seeing me she called down that she would be with me in two minutes for a swim in the bathing pool. I hurried back to the house and donned my bathing costume.

We had a most pleasant bathe, and Armorel instructed me in the rudiments of the art of diving. I found it not nearly so difficult as I had supposed.

We were laughing gaily over a mishap of mine in which I had struck the water primarily with my abdomen instead of my outstretched hands (at least, Armorel was laughing), when there was a rush of footsteps along the springboard and a body shot in a curve right over my head as I was still floundering in the water. It was Sheringham, who I was surprised to see was evidently a most accomplished diver. He proceeded to amuse Armorel by giving a life-saving exhibition in which I found myself enacting the rôle of the dummy. If Sheringham has a fault, it certainly is a tendency to play to the gallery; but in the circumstances I could not take his exuberance amiss.

After our bathe we sat on the hillside in the sun, while Sheringham told us his plans for the day. They consisted chiefly, I think, in his proposed interview with Elsa Verity, an interview with the De Ravels, separately if possible, and a further search for traces of the unknown with whom Sheringham was now convinced Scott-Davies had had his appointment.

‘You see,’ he told us, ‘that appointment does clear up one of the very first questions I asked myself: why Scott-Davies went into that small clearing at all. You remember, Tapers? I mentioned that as an interesting point when we were down there yesterday morning.’

I did remember, and said so.

‘And have you reached any other conclusions, Roger?’ Armorel asked, wriggling her pretty bare toes in a tuft of grass. I was surprised to hear her use of Sheringham’s Christian name, but did not comment on it. I believe it is the modern tendency.

Sheringham pulled a piece of sorrel and began nibbling at it. ‘Yes, one. The person I’m looking for has a very limited imagination. Not that that helps us much, because most people have; but this one is quite remarkably limited. The

whole idea of the crime is copied exactly, you see, from the mock murder in your play; the stage is set for the same accident, with hardly a detail different. Anyone with imagination would realize at once that of all the ways at that time to stage an apparent accident, that would be the most suspicious. But our unknown simply hadn't the imagination either to see that or to invent a fresh method – or even a fresh detail or two.'

'Yes,' Arnorel agreed. 'But as you say, that doesn't help much. You can hardly go about testing people's imaginations, and picking on the poorest as the criminal, can you?'

'Hist!' said Sheringham. 'We're observed.'

One of the farmhands was walking across our front, just above the fringe of woodland that bordered the stream. He had a gun under his arm, and was looking up in the treetops.

'It's only poor old Morton,' Arnorel said carelessly. 'And we aren't observed. He's after "they rooks". I had a long talk with him yesterday after tea, and he seemed very bitter about "they rooks". By the way, Roger, you might like to have a word with him too. He was working in the field beyond Bluebell Wood that afternoon.'

'Was he?' Sheringham said interestedly. 'Then I certainly shall. He's just the sort of witness I want. Oh, I say – good shot!' A young rook had flown suddenly out from the trees and circled sharply; before it could complete its turning movement, Morton's gun had flashed up and fired, and it had dropped. 'I must say I shoot my rooks sitting. But that's with a rifle of course, not a shotgun.'

'That's a rifle too,' said Arnorel confidently.

'Oh, no, surely not. It would be a simply marvellous shot with a rifle.'

‘And so it was, because it certainly is a rifle. Can’t you tell the difference? A shotgun goes “plop!” and a rifle goes “pip!” That went “pip!” distinctly. Go and ask him if you don’t believe me.’

‘I will,’ said Sheringham, and promptly bounded down the hillside.

He exchanged a few words with the man, and then came back to us.

‘You’re perfectly right, Armored; it was a rifle. Well, I wouldn’t have believed it. The fellow ought to be doing turns in a circus – you know, throwing up glass balls and shooting them in the air. By the way, why did you call him “poor” old Morton?’

‘Oh, there was some trouble about his daughter. She was a housemaid here, and Ethel had to get rid of her because she was going to have a baby or something; sets a bad example for the other maids, you see. I remember her quite well. Pretty girl, very shy and mousy. She went up to London and was supposed to have gone off the deep end; but I saw her in the village the other day (at least, I thought it was her, though she did look rather different; much smarter), so I suppose she only went off the shallow end after all. There’s a plot for you, Roger. I make you a present of it.’

‘Thanks,’ Sheringham grinned. ‘ “Deep End or Shallow? or, The Maid’s Dilemma.” ’

‘I believe I must be getting cold,’ I said suddenly, and not without interest, for I had not noticed the fact at all. ‘My teeth are beginning to chatter.’

‘Then back you go at once,’ commanded Armored prettily, scrambling up. ‘Come on: I’ll race you to the house.’

‘And I’ll follow behind and trip you up into a furze bush,’ Sheringham added. ‘I owe you something for that cold sponge, you frivolous young Tapers.’



‘Did he use a cold sponge on you?’ cried Armorel, laughing. ‘Oh, there’s hope for him yet. You watch, Roger. He’s going to get younger every day from now on.’

Certainly I felt extremely young as I ran up the hillside in the wake of Armorel’s slim, flying figure – though considerably older by the time I reached the house, if no longer cold.

Before we went indoors, Sheringham called to Armorel to stop. ‘By the way,’ he panted, as he caught her up, ‘how do you know – Morton working – in end field – that afternoon?’

‘I saw him. You can see that field quite plainly from the Moorland F – Oh!’

‘Exactly,’ Sheringham grinned.

‘Roger,’ said Armorel, ‘I will no longer deceive you. I *did* go up to the Moorland Field – ’

‘Ah!’

‘But I didn’t stay there. I went down again immediately.’

‘Why?’

‘Just as I said; I wanted to see what was happening – to watch the detection.’

‘And the conversation with Tapers?’

‘A myth. Yes, he’s quite right; I invented it. I didn’t speak to him at all, and he never knew I was there; but I did see him.’

‘Armorel!’ I ejaculated.

‘Oh, yes, I did; that’s true enough.’

‘And he did pick a wild rose?’ asked Sheringham.

‘He did,’ Armorel replied calmly.

‘I’m quite certain I didn’t,’ I put in.

‘How else could it have got there?’ Armorel added, quite disregarding me.

‘How indeed?’ said Sheringham. ‘And that really is the truth, young woman, is it?’

‘Near enough, old detective,’ Armorel laughed. ‘Any more questions?’

‘Yes, two. Have you stayed here often?’

‘Yes, quite.’

‘Always with your cousin?’

‘Not always. Usually.’

‘Thank you. That’s all.’

‘Thank you, Mr Sheringham.’

Armorel swept him an ironical curtsey with her bathing wrap and ran into the house.

I lingered a moment. ‘I’m quite sure,’ I assured Sheringham earnestly, ‘that she was *not* speaking the truth. She was never near the place.’

‘Run along, run along,’ Sheringham told me indulgently, ‘or your teeth will begin to chatter again.’

I do not intend to waste the reader’s time with Armorel’s and my own activities during the rest of that day. I will say merely that we set off immediately after breakfast in the car, the others having not the smallest inkling of our purpose or even of our engagement, saw the bishop (who was *most* kind), and were married. I made a particular note of Armorel’s first words alone to me after she became Mrs Pinkerton. They were: ‘The Whirlwind Wooer, or Cyclone Cyril. Kiss your hapless victim, Cyclone, darling.’

On the spur of the moment we decided to stay in Exeter for the night, and Armorel insisted on sending a telegram to Ethel:

*Decoyed away by Cyril, drugged and married. Returning tomorrow.* ARMOREL.

It seemed to afford her and the young woman in the post office considerable amusement, but made me feel somewhat foolish. So did the fact that we had no luggage with us, so that Armorel took me shopping. I had never been inside a feminine shop before and protested vehemently, but Armorel insisted that it was quite time my education began. Then at the hotel she...

But all this is quite irrelevant.

We got back to Minton Deeps in time for dinner the next evening. Naturally a tremendous fuss had to be made; Elsa opened her blue eyes to their widest, Ethel wept, and John brought out champagne. The De Ravels, I was most relieved to discover, had gone, on the previous day. De Ravel had seen the chief constable and obtained permission to leave with his wife, on the condition that they attend the adjourned inquest. It seemed strange, during the very gay dinner which followed our arrival, to reflect that one of our number had less than a week ago suffered a violent death. Truly Eric Scott-Davies had left little mourning behind him.

Needless to say, however, the shadow of anxiety still hung over us. No sooner had the three women left us than I put the question to Sheringham which had been burning on my lips all through dinner: had he discovered anything fresh?

‘Oh, yes and no,’ Sheringham replied carelessly.

‘At any rate,’ said John, ‘he’s been extremely busy. We’ve hardly seen anything of him.’

‘What have you found, Sheringham?’ I asked anxiously.

Sheringham sipped his port. ‘A number of curious things, Tapers. The father of old Morton’s daughter’s illegitimate child, for one instance; how a bullet travelling at an angle to the ground can make a horizontal wound, for another; that Miss Verity and Scott-Davies got engaged not on the morning of his death at all but on the previous evening, for a third; that a board in the passage just outside Mrs de

Ravel's room creaks when stepped on, for a fourth; and, most interesting of all, that Scott-Davies himself took the gun that killed him from the rack that morning.'

'Precisely as I told the police myself!' I cried.

'You did?' Sheringham said quickly. 'How did you know?'

'I didn't. They asked me if I could account for the accident, and I gave them my theory: that he had taken down the gun in the morning, left it there, retrieved it and forgotten he had left it loaded, handled it carelessly in consequence, and the thing had gone off.'

'Into his back,' said Sheringham thoughtfully. 'Well, there may be something in the idea after all.'

'You've really come round to the theory of accident, then?' John asked respectfully.

'I didn't say so. All these curious new facts have got to be examined, you know, and the relevant ones correlated first.'

'But the inquest is to be resumed tomorrow morning,' I said apprehensively.

'And the verdict will be "accidental death",' Sheringham smiled with the utmost confidence. 'Hillyard and I are taking steps to assure it.'

'You've taken steps, you mean,' said John. 'And very grateful to you we shall all be if it is so. But - '

'What steps?' I asked.

John looked at his watch. 'Colonel Grace has promised to bring Superintendent Hancock over here this evening (they're due in ten minutes) for a conference. Sheringham has something to say to them, and, I believe, to us. What it is I haven't the faintest idea, except that, as I understand, Sheringham is going to clear the case up.'

'Really, Hillyard,' Sheringham had to protest. 'It's not so simple as all that. I'm not one of those people who can come down, take one look at a case, and then tell the

blundering police exactly where they're making their silly mistakes. No; all I can undertake to do is to put things before the colonel and the superintendent in such a way as may make them drop a hint to the coroner that a verdict of "accidental death" is more than advisable. And of course I can't in the least guarantee that they'll do even that.'

'But do you mean that such a verdict represents your idea of the truth?' I persisted.

'What is truth?' Sheringham said mockingly. 'Is it what might have happened, is it what was meant to happen, is it what ought to have happened, or is it only what prosaically did happen? That's one of the things we've got to thresh out this evening.'

I shrugged my shoulders. If Sheringham was determined to be mysterious, certainly I would not press him.

John held up his finger. 'Hullo, there they are. I hear a car.'

'No,' said Sheringham, 'I don't think that's the colonel. But I fancy I know who it is.'

'Who?'

'Come out and see.'

We trooped out into the hall, and Sheringham himself opened the front door. Two indistinct figures were coming up the path.

'Why,' said John in surprise, 'it's the De Ravels.'

'Of course it is,' said the peevish voice of Paul de Ravel. 'Considering you wired us to come back at once - '

We stood aside from the door, and Mrs de Ravel swept in as if making a long-awaited entrance in the third act, followed by her husband.

John stared at them. 'But I never wired to you.'

'Let me explain,' Sheringham remarked. 'I sent the wire, and I'm afraid I put your name to it, Hillyard. You see,' he

added pleasantly, 'I'm about to accuse De Ravel publicly of murder, so I thought he really ought to be here to hear it.'

## **chapter fifteen**

‘Of course, Colonel,’ said Sheringham, settling himself more comfortably in his chair, ‘you realize that this is nothing more than an informal discussion?’

‘Certainly,’ agreed the chief constable.

Sheringham cast a faintly speculative eye around the room.

Certainly the proceedings so far had been informal enough. Colonel Grace and his superintendent had duly arrived, been taken into the drawing room where the rest of us were waiting, and furnished with chairs and drinks. For a few minutes the conversation had been anything rather than the death of Eric Scott-Davies, though it was noticeable that the chairs formed a rough circle with Sheringham at its head. Besides the two police officials and Sheringham there were present Ethel and John, the De Ravels, Armored, and myself. Elsa Verity was not with us; the conversation, it was understood, would not concern her personally and could only be painful.

‘And I want to make the stipulation,’ Sheringham proceeded now, ‘that anything said by anyone except myself is not to be taken as evidence, or used later as such.’

‘Can hardly agree to that, sir,’ said the superintendent, who was sitting on the extreme forward edge of his chair and looking extremely uncomfortable.

‘Oh, I think we can, Superintendent, eh?’ Colonel Grace said persuasively.

‘Most irregular, sir,’ replied the superintendent obstinately.

‘But so is this conference itself,’ Sheringham pointed out. ‘Most irregular. Police and suspects meet face to face in drawing room and talk things over. What could be more irregular?’

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t agree to tie myself to the extent you mention,’ repeated the superintendent, and looked very hot and mulish.

‘Then you destroy the whole object of my idea, which involves a frank discussion of all points in question. You can hardly expect people to talk freely, you know, if they know their words are going to be thrown up at them in the witness box afterwards. – Anyhow,’ Sheringham added carelessly, ‘please yourself, Superintendent. If you don’t agree to that condition, I don’t say a word. No doubt it won’t matter to you one way or the other.’

‘Excuse me a moment, Mrs Hillyard, please,’ said the Colonel, and, bending forward, engaged in a low-toned conversation with his subordinate.

Mrs de Ravel yawned charmingly.

The colonel sat back in his chair and nodded to Sheringham. ‘We agree,’ he said briefly.

‘Excellent! Then I’ll begin. And the first thing I want to say is this: excluding for the moment the possibility of accident, and assuming that we are examining a case of murder, before we can fix the responsibility on any one person three things must first be quite definitely proved: opportunity, means, and action; in addition to which it is advisable but not legally essential to prove a fourth, motive. We’ll consider opportunity first.

‘Now remember the circumstances. Everyone had left the plateau at the bottom of the valley. For three minutes at least the path along the stream was unobserved, until Pinkerton made his second visit. Anyone could have come along it from the upstream direction during those three



minutes; anyone could have come along it from the other direction at any time. The only person whose alibi during the critical time is confirmed by more than one person is Mrs Hillyard. She is the only one whom we can definitely rule out here and now from any possibility of having been near the scene of death at the time when it took place.

‘As to the rest, Mr and Mrs de Ravel confirm each other’s alibis. Pinkerton did not know he had one till Mrs Pinkerton supplied it. Mrs Pinkerton hasn’t – ’

‘I beg your pardon,’ interrupted the colonel. ‘Did you say Mrs Pinkerton?’

‘Yes,’ Sheringham replied easily. ‘Miss Scott-Davies who was. They were married yesterday. Didn’t you know?’

‘No, I can’t say I did.’

‘Oh, yes. They got engaged the evening before. And as neither of them believes in long engagements they very sensibly got married the next day. However, that’s neither here nor there. Mrs Pinkerton, I was going on to say, has no alibi at all, because her husband, most unfairly, refuses to give her one.’

‘Really, Sheringham,’ I had to protest uneasily, ‘I didn’t – ’

‘You denied on oath that there was any truth in her story, didn’t you? And if that isn’t refusing to confirm her alibi, I don’t know what is. Anyhow, never mind that now; I’ll argue that point out with you later if you like. Hillyard again has no alibi at all, and – who else is there? Oh, yes; Miss Verity. Well, she hasn’t either. So on opportunity we have a nice wide choice.

‘As to means, exactly the same persons who had opportunity had means, because I’m satisfied that there’s very little room for doubt that Scott-Davies himself took the gun that killed him down to the neighbourhood of the stream earlier in the day. Miss Verity is prepared to swear that when they went for a stroll together soon after

breakfast, Scott-Davies had a gun under his arm; she is almost sure a rifle, because he said something about rooks. They went down to the stream by the swimming pool and walked along the path beside it nearly as far as Bluebell Wood, when they turned up the hill. On the way they sat down several times. Before returning to the house they went to the garage, where Scott-Davies wanted to make one or two small adjustments to his car before going into Budeford. Miss Verity isn't ready to swear that he had not got the gun with him when they reached the garage because she says she isn't certain, though very nearly so. I think we may call it a safe assumption that the rifle was left behind at one of the spots where they stopped to rest.

'By the way, Superintendent,' Sheringham added rather unkindly, 'how was it that you didn't establish that from Miss Verity? She says you never asked her anything about the rifle at all, or she could have told you so much at once.'

'Well, no, sir, I didn't,' mumbled the superintendent unhappily. 'You see, I had to be very quick; the poor young lady was still very upset.'

And somehow I never did think of it being Mr Scott-Davies himself who took the gun out of the rack. I knew it couldn't have been the young lady herself, you see, sir, so I just didn't think to ask her about him, or about the gun at all.' This was said less to Sheringham than to his own superior, who pulled at his white moustache and looked officially stern. I guessed that a reprimand was being meditated, and from the unhappy expression on his large face the superintendent guessed the same.

'Well, however that may be,' Sheringham continued, 'means gives us just as wide a net as opportunity. Anyone could have found the gun.'

'Conversely, action gives us absolutely nothing. I may be wrong, but I don't know of the slightest evidence of action

at all.' He looked inquiringly at the colonel.

'No direct evidence, certainly,' conceded the latter.

'Direct evidence! Well, hardly. But no circumstantial evidence either. No, it's in regard to action that we have to rely on conjecture to indicate not only our murderer, but even the very way in which we're going to prove our case against him - or her.

'And lastly motive. Well, I don't want to go into that too closely here. It's enough to say that every single person of those who had the opportunity had the motive. Except of course Miss Verity. And in all cases it was a powerful one, except Pinkerton's. His we must admit to be weak. One doesn't go to the length of murder in revenge for a ducking; unless perhaps at the very moment, if quite insane with rage.'

'If I might make a suggestion there, sir,' remarked the superintendent, 'I think you said this was to be a frank discussion?'

'Quite. Do, Superintendent.'

'Well!' The superintendent eyed me grimly. 'You've told us that Mr Pinkerton and Miss Scott-Davies have just been married, which was a very interesting piece of news, I'm sure. That gives him the same motive as her, doesn't it? We've made inquiries, of course, and confirmed that Miss Scott-Davies - Mrs Pinkerton, I should say - benefits very considerably by her cousin's death.'

'You mean there could have been a conspiracy between them?' Sheringham said easily. 'Exactly. I was going to touch on that later myself.' I caught my breath. 'In the meantime we'll admit the point that, if marriage had already been agreed on between them, Pinkerton has just as strong a motive as anyone else.'

'It's just an idea that occurred to me,' said the superintendent, almost apologetically. He seemed a little

surprised that Sheringham had agreed with him so readily.

‘Of course. And to me too. In fact, it’s fairly obvious. However, to proceed. I want to put Pinkerton before you as the person who really did shoot Scott-Davies. And I’ll tell you exactly how he did it.’

I could scarcely believe my ears. Did Sheringham really intend to deliver me, with all the prestige of his reputation, into the hands of the very police from whom I had summoned him to rescue me? A cold apprehension grew on me as I listened.

‘He had found the rifle which Scott-Davies had left behind him, and concealed it for the purpose. During the play he made an opportunity to whisper to Scott-Davies that he wished to speak to him alone after the others had gone up, on an extremely important matter, and suggested the smaller glade where they could meet and talk privately. He let Professor Johnson and Bradley go on ahead, and the chance shot fired by Hillyard afforded him an excellent excuse to leave Mrs Fitzwilliam on the pretence of warning the unknown firer, though any other pretext would have served just as well – the cigarette case which he had purposely left behind, for instance. He then had no difficulty in shooting Scott-Davies in accordance with his plan, and, wishing to leave the appearance of accident and being a person of extremely limited imagination, copied exactly the details from the play in which he had just been performing the very same task and so had them at his finger-ends.

‘Miss Scott-Davies suspected him, and perhaps more than suspected him, but being in love with him came out with that story at the inquest with the intention of exonerating him. I suggest that her story was completely false from beginning to end, that she was on the hillside all the time, and that the reason for Pinkerton denying the story was that he realized that in shielding him she had brought herself under suspicion of having committed the murder, and, being

just as much in love with her as she is with him, would rather take all the consequences of his own crime than let her be involved in them. That, I suggest, Colonel, is the real truth, and why you don't arrest Pinkerton I can't understand.'

I stared at Sheringham aghast. This was too dreadful.

The colonel too was little less taken aback. He pulled at his moustache and mumbled. 'Well, upon my word, I knew this was going to be an unconventional business, but - ' He exchanged a glance with the superintendent that made my blood run cold.

But before the latter could reply Armorel had jumped to her feet. 'You can't arrest him!' she cried wildly. 'He didn't do it. I'll confess. I shot Eric. I crept down from - '

'Ah!' said Sheringham, in a tone of horrible triumph. 'That's precisely what I was getting at. Now we've got the truth. Congratulate me, Colonel. I've made the real criminal confess for you, in the presence of all these witnesses. I knew, but I couldn't prove it. A little ruse like that, which you regulars can't very well use, will often - '

But I could stand no more, 'Sheringham!' I exclaimed. 'Are you mad? You know perfectly well she had nothing to do with it. But I see your trap, though I can't avoid it.' I turned to where the two officials were sitting. 'Gentlemen, Mr Sheringham forces me to tell you the truth. You were perfectly right in your first suspicions. I did shoot Mr Scott-Davies.'

'Oh, Cyril,' came a wailing cry from Ethel, but I hardly heard it.

'I must ask you, however,' I went on, with what dignity I could, 'to accept my word for it that my wife had no foreknowledge either of my intentions or - '

'So there are two of them to choose from,' Sheringham suddenly interrupted me. At the same moment Armorel,

who had resumed her seat on the couch on which we had been sitting, caught at my hand and pulled me down beside her. 'Two perfectly good confessions. The only trouble is that they contradict each other, but does a small thing like that matter?

'Now let's consider this guilty pair a little further. Suppose, as the superintendent suggests, that this is all a very clever little plot. Suppose they agreed to shoot Scott-Davies between them, and share the inheritance by marriage, even going so far as to arrange this double confession if suspicion should ever fall on either of them. That would be a cunning piece of work, wouldn't it? The only trouble with it is that it isn't the case. I myself am a witness to the fact that no engagement between them, let alone marriage, had ever been even mooted before the night before last; and if I hadn't taken Mr Pinkerton by his trembling shoulders then and literally kicked him into proposing to the girl with whom he was in love but who he imagined couldn't possibly be in love with him, and insisted myself on writing a letter to the bishop to marry them out of hand by extra-special licence the very next day before Miss Scott-Davies could think better of it - well, there wouldn't have been any engagement or marriage yet. And there's simply no way of getting over that. Isn't that the case, Pinkerton?'

'Well,' I hesitated, in acute discomfort (really, Sheringham was quite impossible); but any further words I might have uttered were completely drowned in a most discomfiting shout of laughter in which everyone, including even Armorel, seemed to join.

'Is this true?' she demanded, still laughing.

I tried to assure her that it was not - at least, not wholly so, but the amused glances of the others caused me to falter unconvincingly in my speech. I fear that to this day Armorel quite believes that I was literally kicked into proposing to her.

‘Well, that’s enough of comedy,’ Sheringham grinned unkindly. The reason I introduced it was to show that Mr and Mrs Pinkerton can each be relied on for a prompt confession of murder whenever anyone accuses the other. I suggest that there is only one inference to be drawn from that, and that is that each of them suspects the other, or knows at least that the other’s alibi isn’t cast-iron; in other words, that both of them are innocent. Mrs Pinkerton’s story, no doubt, is only partially true, and – ’

‘I don’t admit that,’ Armorel put in quickly. ‘I say it’s all true.’

‘Of course you do,’ Sheringham said in approving tones. ‘But I say that you altered it slightly to cover the time of the second shot, which was not really the case. No doubt I’m quite wrong, and in any case it doesn’t matter in the least because your other evidence, which there’s no reason to doubt, and which is actually confirmed by Mrs Fitzwilliam, proves I think quite conclusively that the shot which Hillyard fired was the second, and therefore Pinkerton couldn’t have fired it; and proves further that Scott-Davies was killed by the first shot, for which Pinkerton has a perfect alibi. I take it you’re already convinced of that Colonel?’

‘Yes,’ nodded the colonel. ‘That seems quite established now. Eh, Superintendent?’

‘Quite, sir. I don’t know if Mr Pinkerton ever imagined that we were considering a case against him, but I should like to assure him now that it isn’t in our minds at all.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, not very heartily, for I had not forgotten the obvious scepticism with which the superintendent had received my account of events in the first place. But I was exceedingly relieved all the same.

At this point Armorel jogged my elbow. I looked at her, and she handed me an open note. In considerable astonishment I read as follows:

ARMOREL:

When I accuse CP of murder, I want you to jump up and confess to it yourself. Don't be alarmed: it's bluff on my part. I want to get him up to confess too, and he'll do it much more convincingly if he thinks you're serious. I just want to present the police with the same situation as you gave me the other evening. After he's said his piece, show him this note to reassure him. And after that, neither of you interrupt or speak a word during the rest of the proceedings.

NB - This Is Serious. If CP looks like disobeying orders, clap a cushion over his mouth and hold it there.

RS

I looked at Armored with raised eyebrows. She took the note back from me and laid her finger on her lips.

In no little bewilderment I turned my attention back to the proceedings in question.

'So now we've got Pinkerton as well as Mrs Hillyard eliminated beyond all doubt,' Sheringham had resumed. 'As to Mrs Pinkerton, I have a piece of evidence which I think may come as a surprise. Did you question a farmhand called Morton, Superintendent?'

'Certainly I did, sir, considering he was working in the first field beyond the woods all that afternoon,' replied the superintendent with dignity. 'But he had nothing of importance to tell me. He didn't even hear the shots.'

'Oh, yes, he had, but he didn't know it was of importance, and you didn't ask him. He saw Miss Scott-Davies sitting in the Moorland Field, at precisely the time when she ought to have been sitting there. At least, he saw a woman in a blue dress, and I've ascertained that Miss Scott-Davies was the only person wearing a blue dress that afternoon.'



‘Yes, sir?’ said the superintendent, in somewhat puzzled tones. ‘Well, what does that prove?’

‘Ah! What does it? I’ll tell you. Nothing! Not even that Miss Scott-Davies is an unreliable witness, because she’s already admitted to me that she did go up to the Moorland Field for a few minutes, before going down again. You see, Morton only glanced up there and saw her once. He didn’t look again. And he hasn’t the faintest idea what time it was. He can’t even check it by the shots, because, as you say, he didn’t hear them. I asked him, was it twenty minutes past three? He said, very like. I asked him, was it twenty minutes to four? He said, very like. In other words, he may agree with the prosecution that it was the former, but he’ll agree equally readily with the defence that it might just as well have been the latter. He can’t say more, because he doesn’t know. But it’s a far bigger point in favour of the defence that she was there at all, than for the prosecution that it might quite possibly have been during an unimportant period.

‘And for the rest, there’s no case against her beyond motive, which is obvious, and opportunity, which she readily admits; and of course you can’t put her husband in the box against her on that. But her story of the two honeysuckle bushes is plausible, and the two bushes are there for witnesses; while her account of her conversation with her cousin before either of the shots would almost certainly convince a jury. No, there’s no case beyond the mildest suspicion; certainly nothing that you could possibly present to a jury. Besides, I know perfectly well she didn’t shoot him.’

‘You speak as if we suspected she had,’ remarked the colonel uncomfortably.

‘Of course. I give you credit for doing your duty unflinchingly, Colonel, however unpleasant; and it was certainly your duty to suspect the present Mrs Pinkerton. Still, with your agreement we’ll eliminate her from now

onwards; and select as points for belief in her story the conversation with her cousin and the incident of the wild rose, already more or less confirmed. Can you, without giving away official secrets, say whether you do agree to that?’

The colonel glanced at Superintendent Hancock. ‘I’ll leave that to you, Superintendent. Answer or not, as you think fit. But I see no reason for not doing so, if you so agree.’

‘Very well, sir,’ the superintendent said, almost resignedly. So much candour was evidently against all his instincts. ‘I agree. And I’ll add, if it will relieve anyone’s mind, that we are certainly not contemplating the case against Mrs Pinkerton that you mention. We wouldn’t,’ added the superintendent, candid himself for once, ‘stand a dog’s chance on it.’

It can be imagined with what overwhelming relief I heard these words.

‘Of course you wouldn’t,’ said Sheringham, with great heartiness. ‘Besides, she didn’t do it. But now that we’ve cleared those two, I’ll tell you who did.’

‘You will, sir?’ said the superintendent, sitting up.

‘Certainly I will. I’ve already broken the news to the person in question, so it won’t come as a shock. Just before you came, I thought it my duty to tell Mr de Ravel that I intended to accuse him publicly of murder.’ Sheringham paused and looked fixedly at De Ravel.

Paul de Ravel had gone very pale. He uttered an obviously forced laugh and fingered his little moustache. ‘I suppose we must listen to this nonsense?’ he said, but I noticed that he brought the words out only with difficulty. I suppose that, knowing the circumstances, I ought to have been very sorry for the man; I can only say that I was not. In my opinion De Ravel deserved anything that came to him. In any case, I followed Sheringham’s wishes and did not interrupt.

‘I see,’ said the chief constable quietly. ‘I suppose you’re prepared to substantiate that statement, Sheringham?’

‘Most certainly I am. I’ll do so now. You remember that Mr and Mrs de Ravel have a mutual alibi. According to their statement, instead of being in separate places, as according to the little play they should have been, they were together; Mrs de Ravel, in fact, bored with the proceedings, joined her husband on the banks of the bathing pool. Well, I know for a fact that this statement is false.’

‘You do, really?’ sneered De Ravel. ‘And may I ask, how?’

‘On definite evidence,’ Sheringham returned sharply. ‘I don’t make that kind of assertion without evidence. Perhaps you aren’t aware that just beyond the bathing pool is a public footpath to the next village. From a certain point on it one can see the whole of the bathing pool. There’s a gap in the fringe of trees surrounding it.’

John nodded. ‘One was blown down in the gale last winter. I knew the gap allowed a view of the pool.’

‘Yes. And apparently it’s quite an amusement for the local yokels to pause on the path and watch any bathing in progress. I thought it as well to confirm Mr de Ravel’s alibi this morning, so I made inquiries. By a piece of luck I found a girl who had a hopeful look that afternoon. So far as I could make out, she was there for about ten minutes, between 3:30 and 3:40. There was no one either in the pool or anywhere near it.

Perhaps Mr de Ravel will account for that?’

‘I’ll account for nothing,’ De Ravel replied angrily.

‘But you do at least admit it?’

‘Certainly not. I admit nothing, either.’

‘Very well, I’ll account for it. You never went near the pool at all. You hung about, waiting your chance, with the rifle that Scott-Davies had left below and which you had found.

You knew he was waiting for somebody – Miss Verity coming along from Bluebell Wood, in all probability. You followed him into the thicket and shot him. Your wife was afraid of something of the sort. Either she taxed you with it immediately afterwards and you admitted it, or else she had followed you and seen the whole thing. Between you, you then concocted the story of the mutual alibi at the bathing pool, and the presence of Pinkerton, whom you saw from your hiding place but who didn't see you, was a further safeguard for you. Isn't that what happened?'

'Damn you, no; it isn't.'

'No,' Sheringham at once assented. 'I thought it might not be. What really happened is that Mrs de Ravel was your accomplice before the fact, not merely after it. You planned the murder together. Then she – '

'Damn you, keep my wife's name out of this,' De Ravel shouted passionately. 'She had nothing to do with it. That's one fact for you at any rate.'

'But you did, eh?' Sheringham pressed the wretched man.

De Ravel hesitated, glaring at his tormentor, and licked his lips. Then he seemed to make up his mind. 'Yes, I did. You can do what you like. I don't care. What's the use? I shot him. My wife had nothing to do with it. She never even knew. I simply told her it would be better if we said we were together at the pool, to save bother. So now you've got it.'

I had been listening to all this with the utmost amazement, but it was nothing to the amazement with which I heard Mrs de Ravel speak next. She drawled, with the utmost nonchalance: 'Now, Paul, that really was terribly sweet of you. But I couldn't possibly go to those lengths, you know. My dear policeman, or whatever you call yourself,' she went on, turning to Sheringham, 'you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick. It wasn't Paul who shot

the man at all. It was I. Otherwise your what-d'yecall-it? – reconstruction was quite correct.'

'Thank you, Mrs de Ravel,' Sheringham smiled. 'But I hadn't got hold of the wrong end of the stick at all. I knew it was you. That's why I first of all accused Pinkerton (because I was sure that Mrs Pinkerton would oblige as she did), and afterwards your husband. With the example of wifely devotion before you, I felt I could rely on your rising to a similarly dramatic occasion. So you admit to shooting Scott-Davies, Mrs de Ravel?'

'Hell, I told you / shot him!' cried De Ravel, but his tone was now rather anxious than passionate.

'There seems positive competition for the post,' Sheringham observed mildly.

'Oh, dear,' murmured Ethel distractedly. 'What *is* all this about?'

'It's all right, Mrs Hillyard. I'm just collecting confessions for the police, that's all. We've bagged four to date.'

Colonel Grace, who had been looking just as puzzled as Ethel, if not so distressed, uttered an exclamation. 'Sheringham, are you pulling our legs? Are you going on to say that this double confession means just the same as the last: that Mr and Mrs de Ravel each had a suspicion of the other, and therefore neither of them can be the – the person we're looking for?'

'I might,' Sheringham smiled. 'On the other hand, I might have been going on to say that that is what the guilty one counted on me saying, as I said it before.'

This is getting very complicated,' sighed the colonel.

'It is. But it's a complicated case, isn't it? I thought we'd all agreed on that. Though it might simplify matters a little if Mr and Mrs de Ravel would tell us the truth about their movements that afternoon.'

‘Don’t you really suspect either of us then?’ inquired Mrs de Ravel lazily. ‘How terribly disappointing!’ She blew the ash off the end of her cigarette onto the carpet, and contemplated the glowing butt with her magnificent head slightly on one side, in dreamy approval.

‘No, I can’t say I do really. It was just an experiment. Quite unjustifiable, but more successful than I dared hope. I apologize; and in the same breath I suggest that you both now tell us the truth.’

‘I’m damned if I’ll tell you a thing,’ exploded De Ravel, but more in relief than anger.

‘How silly of you, Paul,’ murmured Mrs de Ravel to the ceiling. ‘Of course we’ll tell them, if they really want to know. I was on the hillside, asleep in the sun. Was that very dreadful of me? I can’t prove it, you know. I told Paul, but he never believed me. He thought I’d shot Eric. Too absurd. I believe he even tried to frighten Mr Pinkerton into giving me away, but it didn’t come off; because, of course, there was nothing to give away. But that only seemed to make Paul all the surer. So I tried just the same thing, and that was no good either. Did you ever hear anything more ridiculous? But Paul was rather sweet about it, I must say, and told me he’d confess to the crime (it was a crime, to shoot Eric, I suppose? How odd!) – he’d confess to the crime himself if any suspicion fell on me. Too honest, I thought, because of course I was quite sure he’d done it himself all the time. You see, he was in a terrible temper that afternoon, and – oh, you tell them yourself, Paul, where you said you were.’

I could not help smiling, tense though the situation was. Mrs de Ravel was now playing the modern bright young person, with all her silly tricks of expression, amused for a time by being suspected of murder but soon bored again. Perhaps it was the best part she could have selected. At any rate I was thankful she had not chosen to be a tragedy queen.

‘Oh, very well,’ growled De Ravel, to whom of course this lightly expressed request was a command. ‘If you must know, I did go to the bathing pool first of all, and then I moved a little along the stream. I was impatient, I suppose, and got on the move earlier than necessary. I had to hang about on the way. I wanted to catch Scott-Davies before he went up.’

‘Tell them why, Paul,’ ordered his wife lazily.

‘No, I will not,’ retorted de Ravel, rebelling for once.

‘Then I will.’ Mrs de Ravel brought her gaze down from the ceiling and swept it slowly round the circle, opening her eyes very wide. ‘He wanted to challenge him to a duel. Did you ever hear such a thing? Too thrilling. But too silly too, as I told him, because Eric would certainly have chosen Indian clubs, or pickaxes, or something quite impossible, and where would poor Paul have been then? Anyhow, he didn’t catch him at all, because he arrived just at the moment when poor Mr Pinkerton was running away from Eric’s dead body, and Paul heard him telling John all about it. So he rushed back to tell me (this is only what he says, mind; I don’t suppose he can prove it for a minute), and I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. And of course I wasn’t, because one of the shots had woken me up and I’d gone down to the pool to look for Paul, and *he* wasn’t there. But he never thought of going back there to see if I had, poor dear, so we didn’t see each other till just outside the house, where Paul told me most excitingly to swear I’d been with him all the time at the bathing pool, and I said I wouldn’t say anything so absurd, and Paul said if I didn’t I’d get hanged, so I said I would; but I really quite thought afterwards that it was all bluff and he’d only wanted me to say it to provide a good alibi for himself. Too terribly silly, all of it, don’t you think?’ She dropped back in her chair as if exhausted.

‘I see,’ said Sheringham. ‘Thank you very much, Mrs de Ravel. Too illuminating. So what do you think of all that, Colonel?’

‘Oh, I must reserve judgment, Sheringham. I must reserve judgment, you know,’ replied the colonel, but I could have sworn there was a twinkle in his eye.

‘Well, that’s four people who shot Scott-Davies,’ meditated Sheringham. ‘Let’s see if we can find some more. What about Hillyard here, for instance? He was prowling about the woods all alone, and with a gun. He admits firing one shot. He’s got no shadow of an alibi. Who’s to say he didn’t fire the other shot too? Certainly not I.’

‘Oh, Mr Sheringham!’ said Ethel faintly.

‘Not that I believe for a moment he did, Mrs Hillyard. But he can’t prove he didn’t, and that’s what the law seems to require nowadays.’

‘Well, I’m not going to oblige with a confession for your collection, Sheringham,’ John smiled. ‘But you’re quite right. Who *is* to say I didn’t? No one. But then, who’s to say I did?’

‘Not I,’ Sheringham laughed. ‘And not, I hope, the superintendent either. So shall I tell you who really did, Superintendent?’

‘I’d be interested to hear, sir.’

‘Very well, then. What about the farmhand – Morton? What do you say to him?’

‘Morton?’

‘Certainly. You know he was working in the end field. What was to prevent him slipping along, meeting Scott-Davies, and slipping back again? He had just as good an opportunity as anyone else. And I happen to know he’s really a first-class shot with a rifle.’

‘But – motive, sir. Morton had no motive.’



‘Hadn’t he?’ said Sheringham, quite grimly. ‘I can promise you he had. I don’t know whether you know about a daughter of his, who was a housemaid here once and had an illegitimate child. She was a pretty girl, and Scott-Davies took an interest in her when he was staying here once. They were seen by one of the other maids kissing in the passage. Her child was born nine months later. Is the inference justified? I think so. And for a short time afterwards, I’m told, she went to the bad; though fortunately she pulled up, and her father’s now taken her back. Is it too much to assume that Morton knew the name of the child’s father? Hardly, I should imagine. There’s the motive, and a very strong one too.’

‘Well, I’m blessed,’ said the superintendent helplessly, and looked at his chief constable.

‘That’s true, is it, Sheringham?’ John asked quietly.

‘About Scott-Davies? Perfectly.’

‘Oh,’ said Ethel, with a little moan, ‘what Elsa has escaped!’

I saw Sheringham glance at her in rather a curious way, but could not interpret his expression.

‘But look here, Sheringham,’ demurred the colonel, ‘it may be as you say – probably it is – but the paternity of the child can’t be inferred from that. There is such a thing as coincidence, you know.’

‘Then do as I did. Ask the girl. She may not admit it to you, but she did to me.’

‘She did, eh?’

‘Yes, she did.’

‘Old Morton,’ muttered the superintendent. ‘It’s a possibility. But it’s only theory, sir, isn’t it? There’s no proof at all.’

‘None whatever,’ Sheringham replied cheerfully. ‘And I don’t imagine for a moment that he did it. The setting of the scene for accident, wiping his fingerprints off the gun, and all the rest of it – that doesn’t square with old Morton at all. But I’ll give you a much more interesting possibility, if you like.’

‘Do, sir. I’ve been wondering when you’re going to tell us who really did it.’

‘Oh, I never promised to go as far as that,’ Sheringham said lightly. ‘But while we’re dealing in possibilities, what about Mrs Fitzwilliam? I understand, from hints which Mrs de Ravel let drop and which she may care to elaborate to you, that there had been bad blood at one time between her and Scott-Davies. What would have been easier than for her to nip down that path after Pinkerton, conceal herself in the thicket while he was busy saying “Hi!” in the glade, shoot Scott-Davies as he passed her, and wait for an opportunity to nip up the path again unseen? Nothing. I present you with Mrs Fitzwilliam.’

‘But you don’t really think she did it sir?’

‘I do not. Not for a minute. But she might have done; and so might Mr Hillyard; and so might Morton; and so might any of the four people who you’ve heard actually confess to doing it; and so, I dare say, might anyone in the wide world. But never for a minute can you, or anyone else, actually *prove* that any of them did. So there you are, Superintendent.’

I understood the superintendent to mutter something about it beginning to look as if that was where he was, for a fact.

## **chapter sixteen**

‘Sheringham,’ said the colonel, ‘what’s the idea? You’ve not called us together to tell us who didn’t do it, I’m sure.’

‘Are you, Colonel? Then you’re more sure than I am, because I believe that’s exactly the reason why I did suggest this chat.’

‘I mean, what’s your own opinion? You’ve formed one, I can see.’

‘Yes, I have. Quite definitely. If you’d really care to hear it.’

‘I would, very much.’

‘Well, it’s this. The case is far too open. We’ve got, as I say, seven people, all of whom might have done it, and about an equally strong case can be argued against any one of them. Well, I mean, that’s absurd, isn’t it? In a case of murder such things simply don’t happen. The coincidence that one of those seven people did murder Scott-Davies, and each of the other six might just as well have done so, is really a bit too thick. The more I think of it, the more convinced I am that we’re not dealing with a case of murder at all. And this evening’s business, which was planned for my own benefit just as much as yours, has simply put that conviction beyond any reasonable doubt. Scott-Davies met his death through mere ordinary, prosaic accident.’

‘Humph! You really think so?’

‘I do. And what’s more, I’m sure that counsel could argue a much better case in favour of accident than against any of the seven people I’ve named. Just consider. We know now that Scott-Davies took that rifle down himself, don’t we? It

was really lack of just that knowledge which suggested murder first of all, I think; if you'd known that from the beginning I doubt if you'd have considered murder very seriously at all. Of course one can argue that any one of those seven *might* have found the rifle and concealed it for his or her own purposes, as I did just now when I was trying to show murder in its most favourable aspect; but is it so likely as that Scott-Davies left it there himself with the idea of picking it up after the little play for a stroll in the woods before tea? He knew he wouldn't want it in the garage, you see, and he knew he might want it later: why carry it up to the house and down again?

'Besides, there are the fingerprints on it. Any amount of them. And convincing ones. Not the kind that would have been made if the gun had been wiped to remove the prints of a second person and then imprinted from the dead man's fingers. That's a very big point, isn't it? Almost conclusive, I should have said.

'Anyhow, let's examine the difficulties in the way of the accident theory. There are four, I think, two major and two minor. We'll take the two major ones first, the horizontal line of the bullet, and the absence of powder marks. Now I don't think the first is really important. There's an obvious explanation for that, which exactly fits with what must have happened if the thing was an accident. To have been an accident, Scott-Davies must have been dragging the gun behind him by the muzzle when the trigger caught in some obstruction. Well, what would happen if the stock did catch in some obstruction suddenly? He would be checked in his advance and, if the obstruction were solid enough, his trunk would be pulled back at an angle. That gives your horizontal line for the bullet's path, doesn't it? That it happened to go straight through his heart, and the red patch on his coat, was pure chance. Do you agree so far?'

'Perfectly,' said the colonel.

'I think that's straightforward enough,' said the superintendent.

'Good! Well, then, as to the absence of powder marks, I - no! I think I'll leave that for the moment. I'll deal with the two minor difficulties first. Scott-Davies told Miss Scott-Davies that he had an appointment, we understand. Your trouble is that no one has come forward to acknowledge any such appointment. That, you argue, is suspicious, and the probability is that the appointment was with his subsequent murderer. Well, now, if my theory is right, Miss Scott-Davies unintentionally misled you. I haven't put the point to her, because I wanted to do so in front of you. I will now. Mrs Pinkerton, the impression you gave is that your cousin's words indicated a definite, prearranged appointment, in a particular place. Is that actually what you understood?'

'How do you mean?' Armorel asked cautiously.

'Well, you said that you couldn't remember his exact words, but that was the gist of them. I take it you still don't remember his exact words; but what I want to know is, did you understand from them that he had a definitely prearranged appointment, or might he have meant simply that he *hoped* to see a certain person, and merely on that chance would not walk up with you?'

'Oh, yes,' Armorel said readily. 'I'm sure he didn't mention the actual word 'appointment'. It isn't the sort of word Eric would have used, you know. No, all he did was to hint very plainly that he didn't want my company. Naturally I took it to mean that he was expecting someone else's. That was all.'

'Exactly. Then I was right. There was no definite appointment. He merely hoped to see someone. Well, if we remember that he had only just become engaged, that his fiancée was bound to pass close to where he was, that she was the only person of the party who was beyond him in the downstream direction and away from the house, and that he

actually turned away from Miss Scott-Davies in that direction – well, I think that as an indication of murder the thing simply fizzles out. Eh, Colonel?’

‘Explained in that way, it certainly does.’

‘Precisely. And I suggest that my explanation is not just a counsel’s twist, but the real truth. As to the fourth objection, that it’s inconceivable that a man so used to handling firearms could be so careless – well, one can only reply that such things do happen. You and I, Colonel, must each know of half a dozen just as incredible cases. In this one I think that the explanation which I believe Pinkerton once suggested to you, Superintendent, must be the true one: that Scott-Davies didn’t remember that he had left the gun loaded; he thought he was handling an empty gun. And while we’re on the point it’s interesting to note that there are no less than three pieces of evidence that this is really what did happen.’

‘There are, sir?’ asked the superintendent, not a little sceptically.

‘Certainly,’ Sheringham replied quite sharply. ‘Didn’t you spot them? You should have done. First of all the fingerprints round the top of the barrel; secondly a distinct line on the grass where the blades had been turned over and pressed down (they were beginning to perk up again when I saw it, so the line must have been still more obvious at your first examination), indicating that a narrow object of medium weight had passed over it recently – the stock of a gun, no less, I suggest; and thirdly, there’s a V-shaped stub of root on the edge of the track close to where the stock of the rifle was lying, according to your man – quite enough to cause the sharp obstruction I mentioned, from which of course the recoil of discharge, slight though it would be, together with the convulsive start of the man’s hand as the bullet entered him, would combine to throw it free in the other direction. As I said, three pieces of evidence already. And that’s more

than you've got to support any of your murder cases. What do you say to that, Colonel?'

'You're putting up a very plausible argument, Sheringham, I'll admit. Eh, Superintendent?'

'Very ingenious, sir. It's not much evidence, though I'll confess I overlooked the track on the grass, but any evidence at all in this case is welcome. But what about the absence of powder marks, sir? I notice you've not explained that yet.'

'No, I've been saving that up. And tell me, Superintendent, if I can produce not merely an explanation, but a real piece of evidence to support my explanation, what will you say then? Will you agree with me that it was accident, or will you still hanker after murder?'

'I'd rather hear the explanation and see the evidence first, if you please, sir,' returned the superintendent stolidly.

Sheringham laughed and rose to his feet. 'I'll go and get the evidence,' he said, and went out of the room.

He came back a minute later with a twig in his hand on which were several withered and very tattered leaves. With an air of triumph he gave it to the superintendent. 'Just have a look at that.'

The superintendent examined it closely, and Colonel Grace bent over to look at it too. The rest of us held our breaths.

'Where did you get this, sir?'

'I found it in the undergrowth on the right of where the body was lying, just off the path. It's a sycamore twig. And I found the broken end of the shoot it came off. *And* that broken end is in a direct line between the stub of root and the place in the air where I imagine the red patch on Scott-Davies' coat would have been as he stood up. I'll show it you tomorrow.'

The superintendent looked at the chief constable. 'That's smoke-marking, right enough. The bullet must have passed either between or through these leaves, and they collected the smoke. The explosion blew 'em into these shreds, of course. I'm satisfied, sir.'

'Yes,' nodded the colonel. 'That clinches it. May I congratulate you, Sheringham? You've saved us a lot of trouble, and possibly a miscarriage of justice. Though in any case I don't think we could ever have made an arrest. As you said, we'd no real evidence of murder against anyone, except motive and opportunity, and rather too much of that. Counsel could have torn any case we brought into tatters, and of course we can't afford that sort of thing.'

'Yes, I don't think there's any doubt now. I'm glad you agree with me,' Sheringham said mildly. 'I suppose you'll have a word with the coroner before the proceedings tomorrow morning?'

'Oh, yes; he's very reasonable. He'll see that a verdict of accidental death is brought in, if we put it to him. Besides, it's inevitable on this evidence. You'll be wanted as a witness, by the way, to prove the finding of the twig and all that.'

Sheringham nodded. 'Yes, of course. Well, and so that's the end of the Mystery of Minton Deeps.'

'And what a relief!' Ethel sighed thankfully. 'Mr Sheringham, I don't know what we owe you, or how we can ever repay you.'

'I do, Mrs Hillyard,' Sheringham said lightly. 'With a drink this very minute. You simply can't think how thirsty I am after all that talking.'

'Good gracious, yes,' said John guiltily. 'I should think so. A whisky-and-soda?'

'Whisky-and-soda?' Sheringham echoed reproachfully. 'I'm *thirsty*.'



‘Sorry,’ John grinned. ‘Yes, there is a cask outside. Will you have it in, or would jugs do?’

‘It’d be a pity to disturb the cask. A jug will do nicely, thank you.’

And so the conference broke up into general conversation. An air of elation fell on everyone at the thought of the lifting of the cloud that had been pressing on us so long and the disappearance of mutual suspicion and distrust. Ethel and John were of course delighted and did not hide it, De Ravel became positively boisterous (fancy, I had never had the faintest idea that the De Ravels had suspected each other!), and even Mrs de Ravel became more like a human being than I had ever seen her before. The chief constable was told, amid much amusement, how everyone had at first suspected me of the shooting, and my reception of the different accusations was grossly burlesqued for the general entertainment. But I did not care. Such was my exhilaration that I was almost ready to burlesque myself.

In due course Colonel Grace and Superintendent Hancock drove away, and the party began to drift towards its respective bedrooms.

‘Don’t go up for a minute or two, Pinkertons,’ Sheringham remarked carelessly. ‘Come and keep me company on a moonlit stroll. I shan’t be able to sleep after all that tensy without a little soothing moonlight.’

I was by no means reluctant, and though I suggested that the night air might be chilly for Armored, for it was now long past midnight, she pooh-poohed the idea and insisted on coming with us.

Sheringham led the way along the lane, and in a few minutes we were out of sight, as well as out of sound, of the house. I perceived that Sheringham was making for a rough bench which John had erected under a clump of beech trees a few hundred yards away, from which in the daytime a fine

view was obtainable over the valley and the distant sea. We reached it and seated ourselves.

On the way I had been turning over in my mind a few fitting phrases of thanks to Sheringham for the magnificent manner in which he had rescued us both from our terrible predicament, and I was beginning to deliver these when he cut me abruptly short.

‘Yes, yes, Tapers,’ he said, quite impatiently. ‘That’s all right. Now listen, you two. I’ve brought you here for a purpose, because I think you ought to know the truth. I’m telling it to no one else, not even Hillyard, but in a way I do think it’s owed to you, considering that you laid down the conditions under which I’ve worked and under which I propose to keep silent. Not that I want you to share the responsibility for silence; I’m quite prepared to take all of that, and after tonight you can forget entirely what I’m going to tell you now.’

‘The – the truth?’ I repeated in astonishment. ‘What truth?’

‘Who shot Scott-Davies,’ Sheringham replied shortly.

‘But – I thought you’d proved it was an accident?’

‘So I did – on faked evidence.’

I must have uttered an exclamation of dismay, for Sheringham laughed. ‘Yes, I faked that evidence of the smoke-blackened twig. I shot at it myself, yesterday. It was half-broken already, and the leaves withered, so there won’t be a fresh-looking break to give me away. And as for the track on the grass, I invented it completely.’

‘But – why?’ I stammered.

Sheringham’s voice became serious. ‘Because if ever a man deserved shooting, Scott-Davies did – though he was your cousin, Armorer. And I for one am not going to give away the person who very rightly did it. What’s more, I’m

prepared to fake evidence and commit perjury tomorrow to ensure that no suspicion ever so much as touches her.'

'Her!' I repeated.

'Yes, of course,' Sheringham said, quite testily. 'Isn't it obvious, after what I told you before dinner? Scott-Davies and Elsa Verity got engaged, I said, not that morning at all, but the evening before.'

'You don't mean that - that *Elsa* shot him?'

'Of course I do.'

'But - but - '

'Be quiet, dear, and let Roger tell us,' Armored said gently, but she gave my hand, which she was holding, a tight squeeze which said more than her words.

'There's very little to tell,' Sheringham said moodily. 'And it's not a nice story. Somehow or other Scott-Davies must have persuaded her that evening that he had acted only from the best intentions, Tapers, in throwing you into the pool, and got her promise to marry him. She admitted that to me, but didn't seem to realize its importance. And she told me as well that he seemed very anxious to keep the engagement secret for a few days. She hadn't told anyone else these two facts, she said, because she didn't want to talk about the thing at all and anyhow they didn't matter. I agreed, of course, but added that having concealed them so far she had better continue to do so, which she said she would. I couldn't make too much of a point of secrecy in case she realized that I'd seen the truth, but I don't think she will tell anyone else.

'Well, the reason for Scott-Davies' insistence of keeping the engagement secret is clear enough, isn't it? He was afraid of what Mrs de Ravel might do. He was sure she had something up her sleeve for him, but didn't know what; he wanted to find that out before the engagement could be announced. And that same evening Mrs de Ravel obligingly

informed him. She was going to stage that extremely awkward scene in front of her husband.

‘Your cousin was no fool, Armorel. He knew that Elsa’s eyes would infallibly be opened both to the sort of man he really was and to the fact that he wanted to marry her merely for her money. He had one night in which to ensure that however wide the girl’s eyes were opened, marriage would be inevitable; her feelings of course didn’t matter. And he took the obvious method. Mrs de Ravel, who had developed almost a sixth sense where Scott-Davies was concerned, heard a board creak in the passage that night. She got out of bed and opened her door a fraction – and saw Scott-Davies disappearing into Elsa’s room.’

‘Oh!’ said Armorel, in a low tone of distress. ‘But why didn’t she stop him, or go and tell Ethel, or *something*?’

‘I don’t think Mrs de Ravel is a very nice person,’ Sheringham replied levelly. ‘She had a rod in pickle for Eric, which she was certain would bring him to heel, and she hated Elsa. It amused her own brand of cat-and-mouse cruelty to use Scott-Davies in order to achieve that particularly horrible revenge on her rival, even though it meant her lover’s own temporary amusement. She must have suffered agonies of jealousy that night, but she bore them because her reason told her that it was the most effective revenge she could have on Elsa. Like most self-centred people, however, she underestimated both her opponents. Eric did *not* come to heel the next day; instead he threw his engagement slap in her face. And Elsa Verity did *not* give him up in distressed disgust when she realized the truth about the man; she exacted the value which she very properly put upon herself, and shot him.’

‘And Sylvia told you all this?’ asked Armorel.

‘She admitted, under pressure,’ Sheringham replied carefully, ‘that she saw Scott-Davies going into Elsa’s room.’

I asked her why she took no steps immediately, and she shrugged her shoulders and yawned and said why should she have done, it wasn't any business of hers, she saw no reason to interfere in other people's amusements. Her real reason, of course, was plain.'

'But it never occurred to her that Elsa - '

'Shot him? Oh, no. She had begun by underestimating her, and she went on. She was quite sure that her husband had shot Scott-Davies in a fit of Latin exuberance.'

'And how do you imagine Elsa went about it?' Armorel asked calmly.

'Isn't it obvious? Elsa was the person Scott-Davies was waiting to meet; Elsa knew where the rifle had been left; and it was Elsa, Tapers, who stood at that bend in the path, as you very acutely suggested, and waited. Did you know about those footprints, Armorel?'

'Yes.'

'I admit that I suspected at one time that they were yours. Your shoes fitted my outline exactly. Then I found that Elsa's do too.'

'Yes, we take the same size,' Armorel nodded.

'Armorel,' I said suddenly, 'I don't think - '

'What?'

'Oh, nothing,' I said feebly. Armorel had squeezed my hand so hard that I could not mistake her meaning. I was not to interrupt.

'So that's that, is it?' Armorel said slowly. 'And now all three of us forget all about it, and not another soul ever knows?'

'Yes. And tomorrow a verdict of accidental death is returned, and that will be the end.'

‘Yes.’ Dimly I could see Armorel’s profile as she stared ahead into the darkness. ‘Oh, Roger,’ she said softly, ‘thank God he’s dead. Such men ought not to be allowed to go on living. I think it’s wonderful that anyone should have the courage to accept that and – act on it.’

‘Yes,’ said Sheringham. ‘I agree.’

We sat for a few moments in silence. In the woods below us where Scott-Davies had met his well deserved death, an owl was hooting mournfully. A glimmer in the far distance showed where the moonlight struck on the sea.

‘Poor Elsa!’ Armorel whispered.

epilogue

I have finished my manuscript at last.

It is now nearly three years since I began to write it, working so feverishly on it that hot afternoon in my bedroom at Minton Deeps. The reasons that have caused me to bring it to an end are very different from that which prompted its inauguration. I can say now that this latter, too, was not by any means the one with which I so carefully prefaced my story.

Briefly, I began the writing of this narrative for the sole benefit of the police.

When I realized, three years ago, that the police suspicion in connection with the death of Eric Scott-Davies was becoming more and more dangerously crystallized on myself, I tried not to give way to panic or lose my head; I knew that something must be done, and I set about doing it. It was obvious that Superintendent Hancock’s feeling about me was due to two suppositions, both erroneous: firstly, that I had had the best opportunity of shooting Scott-Davies as I was the only person known to have been down by the stream when the second shot was fired, and secondly, that I had the only motive. With the first of these I could deal only by reiterating the plain truth, that it could not possibly have

been the second shot which had killed him; for the second I had to adopt more subtle methods.

When the police inquiry first began I was anxious that nothing reflecting upon anyone else should reach their ears. I soon realized that this attitude was unnecessarily quixotic. It could not after all be unfair to the others that the police should realize the plain fact that so far from my being the only one with a motive, every single person in our little party (except, so far as I knew then, Elsa Verity) had a motive, and in all cases a far stronger one than mine. If it had been a matter of one other person only, my decision might have been different. But if ever there was safety in numbers, it was in this case. With everyone shown as having an interest in Eric's death, how could one person be singled out more than another? Where one alone was not safe, all together were. The trail would become confused, complicated, impossible to decipher, incapable of proof.

The police, then, I decided, must be informed of the exact circumstances leading up to Scott-Davies' death, with all the hidden intrigue and byplay that would reveal these different motives. But how?

It was useless for me to tell them verbally. Any statement I might make would be sniffed at immediately as tainted, a mere subterfuge to remove suspicion from myself; it could carry no real conviction. The only way was to introduce the knowledge to them in such a way as to lead them to believe that they were discovering it for themselves, almost against the will of the narrator. But once more, how?

And so I conceived the idea of writing it all up in detail in the form of fiction, reconstructing the conversations, setting down every incident as it actually happened. I knew that every action of mine would be watched. If I made a great show of concealing the manuscript, it would certainly be removed and read. It amused me to write down plainly in my story that I was at some pains, when I hid the box

containing it among the roots of that gorse bush, to ascertain whether I had been followed or not. I did make sure of exactly that thing, and I had been followed. It was simple to arrange the lid of the box in such a way that I should know instantly whether it had been opened. It had been, of course.

That, then, was the urgent reason which brought perhaps the first hundred pages of this story into being; and when the necessity was past, and Armorel and I had left Minton Deeps for our delayed honeymoon, I put the thing aside, as I thought, for good. But it is a characteristic of mine never to leave any task to which I have put my hand half-finished. Coming across the manuscript some months afterwards, I added a few chapters just for my own amusement and as a form of mental exercise; and so it has gone on. I am still, however, in doubt whether to send it to a publisher or not, although I have altered all the names so that (now Eric Scott-Davies and his unexpected death have been almost forgotten) the persons and incidents would hardly be recognized.

If I do, however, this epilogue will not go with it. That is written for my own amusement solely. I shall destroy it as soon as it is finished, for such things are dangerous; but just the mere act of setting down on paper what I intend is strangely exciting. If things had not turned out as they did...

These three years have been very happy ones. Working together at and for Stukeleigh and its tenantry, Armorel and I have developed into a deep affection that first impulse, based no doubt upon a combination of fear and gratitude, which brought us together. I cannot in honesty say that all my schemes for Armorel's regeneration have worked out exactly as I planned them. Indeed, some of those who knew us both before and since our marriage affirm that I have altered more than she. That may be, for certainly Armorel seems to have altered very little, while I - well, it may sound



paradoxical but it is perfectly true that the older I get the younger I feel. I can only hope that with Armored's stimulating companionship the process will continue indefinitely.

It seems strange to remember now that once I stood on the very threshold of the gallows.

Is it only thanks to Sheringham that I never stood actually upon them? One cannot say. Personally, I do not think now that on the meagre case the police had against me, things would ever have come to the point of arrest; nor, if they had, is it conceivable that on such very indefinite evidence I could ever have been convicted. Still, I am thankful that it never came to the test.

Stranger still is it to reflect that, but for that ill-timed shot of John Hillyard's, no suspicion would ever have fallen on me at all. No doubt it is just some such unfortunate coincidence which wrecks the most carefully thought-out crimes. Certainly when I laid my plans for killing Scott-Davies I omitted to take any such thing into account; the possibility never even occurred to me.

I see now that it was officious of me to shoot Eric. But in those days I must have been officious. I really did fancy that I had some sort of an appointment to set the world to rights. Secure in the conviction of my own infallibility, it did not merely distress me when people refused to share my opinions; I felt it a duty incumbent on my own rectitude to correct their mistaken notions. I can realize now that this was priggishness, but priggishness may often involve a highly conscientious sense of duty; that it did in my case I set forth not only in extenuation but as an interesting phenomenon. I knew that Eric Scott-Davies had in his short life brought nothing but distress upon those with whom he came in contact; it did not need John to tell me that his life was not only of no manner of use to the community but a positive menace to it; I knew that his continued existence

meant to a great number of people far more than distress, it meant disaster. Obviously for the greater good of the greater number, Eric should be eliminated. And as certainly no one else would undertake the task, I conceived it nothing less than my own duty to do so.

I did not shoot Eric on Armorel's behalf, on Elsa Verity's behalf, on Ethel's behalf, on Paul de Ravel's behalf, or on anyone's behalf; certainly not on my own; I shot him out of a sincere, if as I say officious, conviction that as the only one with the moral courage to recognize that nothing short of a bullet would meet Eric's case, I should be betraying my own superior responsibility by not following up this recognition with action. A curious form of conceit indeed, as I see it now; but even now I cannot think that my conclusion was wrong, by whatever strange method I arrived at it. How many people have not slept more peacefully since Eric Scott-Davies died?

I remember writing at the beginning of this book that I intended to set down everything that had happened with one sole exception, the revelation of which might bring pain to another. I think I have kept my promise. That it was my finger which pulled the fatal trigger will hardly come as a surprise, for I have scarcely troubled to disguise that fact; indeed, I actually prefaced my story with the plain statement that it was to be told from the 'criminal's' point of view. Only over the method I employed have I thrown a cloak, for to have shown that would have been to show also Armorel as an accessory after the fact, a revelation which would naturally have caused her distress. It satisfies my orderly mind to write that method down here so that my book shall at any rate have been tidily rounded off, even if it must go out into the world shorn of this neat appendage.

The fact then on which I based my whole plan was the notoriously defective power of observation of the normal person.

The average man sees only what he expects to see. If you tell him that he is looking at a rabbit, it is a rabbit that he sees; and the piece of dead bracken at which you are pointing becomes invested by his imagination with ears and a shred of white tail. So, I made no doubt, if half a dozen pairs of eyes expected to see a live Eric it would be a live Eric that they would see, for all that they were looking at a dead one.

And so it turned out. They saw Eric (and were ready in all good faith to swear to the fact afterwards), laughing, gesticulating, and for all I know moving his very ears; one or two even heard him speak, and were prepared to testify to his actual words, when all the time he had been dead for minutes – had died, indeed, under those completely unsuspecting eyes of theirs. For I shot Eric in our little scene together with a ball cartridge which I substituted before all those onlookers for the blank one with which John had loaded the rifle.

Of course I did what I could to help the deception.

During the morning I had made what preparations I could. Over a small log I set a forked bough to act as a fulcrum, so that, with the body on the forked end, I could depress the other, hidden from the spectators by the undergrowth, with my foot and thus give the body the appearance of humping itself up in the middle. Then I had left a length of fishing line handy, with a loop to pass over one of Eric's shoes and with that I was able, as I stood above him, to give him the effect of waving his foot in the air; having of course made sure that the line would be invisible at the distance required. And once or twice, as I stooped over him, I uttered an uncouth braying sound, which was at once assumed to have proceeded from him. The very part I was playing enabled me to keep everyone at a safe distance from the body.

Looking back on it now I am appalled by the risks I was content to run. I considered at the time that I had guarded

against nearly all contingencies; but that the result was not as it turned out to be I am modest enough now to attribute, in all thankfulness, to good luck more than to forethought.

It was as I lay awake the previous night that I realized the unique opportunity which the little play would afford to anyone who was seriously considering the elimination of Scott-Davies. The means would be simple, as I had told John all great crimes were. It was only the complication of other people's motives, a state of affairs of which I deliberately availed myself but which had no connection with the mechanism at all, that gave it afterwards the appearance of being involved and intricate. Sheringham was wrong there, and wrong too when he argued the extreme improbability of a case of murder presenting almost equal reasons for suspicion against each of so many different persons. He put the cart before the horse. It was precisely because that would be the case, that murder was committed that afternoon at all. For though I took care to leave the appearance of accident, and hoped sincerely that accident would be accepted, I could not count that murder would never be suspected; what I did count on was that murder could never be proved, or even that any one person could be suspected more than another.

Not that I had actually determined so early to put my plan into operation at all. I merely lay awake, excited by it, considering its details, and thinking what an excellent thing it would be if Eric could thus be quietly eliminated without fuss or bother. I had not made up my mind even the next morning, when I refused Armored's invitation to accompany her to Bluebell Wood and went down alone to make my preparations. It was really, I think, in a spirit of make-believe that I did so. I can truly say that, at that time, I never seriously expected to use them. I knew myself and I knew that, toy as I might with the idea of taking a fellow-creature's life, even delude myself that I was actually

intending to do so, when it came to the point of action to translate the dream into reality was not in my character. Nor would Armored's revelations in Bluebell Wood have influenced me to that extent. Only when I learned that the engagement between Elsa and Eric, of which I had imagined all danger to be over, was an existing fact, did I realize that I had underestimated myself. I knew then that Eric must die.

I think in my own way I went quietly berserk. I remember very little of the lunch which followed. I recollect a small pulse beating in my forehead, and saying to myself over and over again: 'I must do it, I must do it.' I am sure that I no longer considered the possible consequences. My behaviour, actions, and words were entirely mechanical. It was not until Eric lay dead in front of me, with the smoke from the shot that had killed him curling gently out of my rifle barrel, that this curious numb trance fell away from me and my mind became alert once more. I realized fully then what I had done and, with not the slightest feeling either of compunction or panic, at once set about devoting every faculty to safeguarding myself.

That Eric himself had taken the second rifle that morning, which became subsequently a point of considerable importance, was pure chance. My plan involved the use of both rifles, and I expected to have to smuggle the second one down in the morning. When I went for it, however, it was gone. I came across it, actually, in the very glade where our scene was to be enacted, leaning against a tree. Eric must have left it there as he showed Elsa the topography of the place. What I did was to load it with a blank cartridge which I had myself prepared for the purpose, conceal it in the undergrowth several yards below the path up the hill, tie another piece of fishing line round the trigger, and hide the other end of the line beside the path in the place where I subsequently stopped, in the presence of Mrs Fitzwilliam, on the pretext of doing up my shoelace.

All I had to do then, with Mrs Fitzwilliam at my side, was surreptitiously to twitch the line and so fire the gun below. That would not only account, in my scheme, for the shot which was to be reckoned as the one that killed Eric, but would also provide a gun to show unmistakable signs of having fired a blank cartridge.

When I left Mrs Fitzwilliam, my first task was to transfer Eric's body from where it was lying to the place where it was subsequently to be discovered, and I carried it not along that track but along the larger one directly connecting the two glades. It was not an easy job, but I had not been so dense as I pretended when John was trying to teach me the fireman's lift that morning. In reality I had mastered it perfectly, and so was just able to stagger along under Eric's dead weight. Then I fetched the rifle which I had fired with the fishing line, hastily wiped off my own prints and obtained others from Eric's dead fingers, and substituted it for the other rifle which was lying in the glade. This latter already bore Eric's prints (and, as was pointed out later, most convincing ones), for he had carried it, too, down from the house, and though I had pretended to wipe them off with my handkerchief in the play, I had done nothing of the sort. This rifle, moreover, did not bear my own prints, for I had taken the precaution, on my way down to the wood in Eric's wake that afternoon, of coating my fingertips with a solution of 'New Skin', a bottle of which invariably has its place in the small first-aid case which it was then my practice to include in my luggage. To clasp Eric's hand round the muzzle and then lay the weapon behind him did not take a moment. That, with the winding up of my pieces of fishing line, and the removal of the forked bough which had acted as my fulcrum, completed my task. It had not taken me more than five minutes altogether.

At that moment I felt perfectly secure. The only point in the whole scheme about which I had been really anxious

was where Ethel came into it. I had banked on the fact that her mind would be too preoccupied for her to bother to look more than cursorily, and in passing, at Scott-Davies. So, fortunately, it turned out. Had she looked more closely, and realized that he was dead, I was going simply to take her into my confidence. I did not think that moral scruples would worry her in such a case, any more than they had me, and I was certain of being able to rely on her. But nevertheless I was thankful that it did not turn out to be necessary.

What prompted me to go down again for a final look at Eric's body, I cannot say. Perhaps I wanted to make sure that it looked as convincing from that side as the other. In any case it was unfortunate, for my original plan had involved no such early discovery. I had intended simply to leave things as they were, till Eric's absence became noticeable and people went out to look for him; and then somebody else was to find him, not I. And I must confess that when I stumbled into John at the end of the track I did come very near to losing my head for an instant. Fortunately, however, I was able to pull myself together almost at once, and John attributed my nervous condition to nothing more than the natural shock of such a discovery. But it caused me more than a few awkward moments, both then and later.

Once again I came near to losing my head, two days afterwards. My nerves were feeling the strain, and I must have been within an ace of giving myself completely away that morning to the superintendent. My telegram to Sheringham was the nearest I came to an act of panic.

Yet there was method in it, for all that. Sheringham, I knew, was clever. If anyone could prove the plain truth that I had not fired that second shot, I was sure he could. And I never considered him clever enough to discover the real truth. That in the end he should have solved the mystery so extremely neatly, so entirely to his own satisfaction, and so

utterly wrongly, was a point which I certainly did not foresee, but which proved none the less satisfactory for that.

And now I come to Armorel's part in the affair.

Unfortunately for her, poor girl, she could use her eyes. When I shot at Eric in the glade, with the spot of red lead for my aim, which had been my crowning inspiration, Armorel divined at once that I had fired in deadly earnest. She was convinced that it was a dead body at which she was afterwards looking.

Even now I still marvel how she kept her head. There was, however, one moral incentive to steadiness. Simultaneously with her realization of the truth came the conviction that I had done the thing, if not wholly, at any rate partly, for her own sake, in direct consequence of what she had told me that morning. And almost simultaneously came the resolution in that case to take her share of the moral responsibility (as she considered it) and stand by me at all costs. A noble resolve indeed, and one calling for high courage in a girl not yet twenty-four, as she was then. But as she told me later, there was an agonizing interval of indecision before she could make up her mind what to do for the best.

In the end she went up to her place in the Moorland Field and left her book there, so as to establish in case of need that she had actually been there; then she crept down again, unseen, to ascertain what I was doing and, if necessary, come to my aid. She watched me move the body and complete my other tasks, but did not come out from her concealment in case her presence might cause me to lose my head – as indeed it might have done. Instead, she is good enough to say that she was astounded by the coolness with which I went about it all, and realized then and there that she had been entirely mistaken in her estimate of my character, just as I had made the same discovery about her.



Armored has always admired what she calls 'nerve', and she tells me that she watched a finer display of that attribute during those four minutes than ever before or since in her life. She had, of course, the added interest of her belief that it was being done for herself; but however that may be, she says that she fell in love with me then.

It was not until actually after our marriage that Armored divulged this knowledge of hers to me. She says now, with a smile, that she was afraid that if she had informed me earlier I might have got the idea that her promise to marry me was made merely to safeguard me, so that she could never be forced to give evidence of what she knew, and in that case I might have refused to accept it. Another instance of the dear girl's remarkable consideration - though she may try to explain it jokingly away by saying that she was determined (as she puts it) to get her hooks into me and was not going to frighten the fish off before she had secured it.

Similarly I did not know till then what definite steps she had taken in my aid, though of course I suspected them, just as I wondered uneasily at times how much she really did know. I remember writing, quite unwittingly, at the beginning of this narrative, of the interest with which one might trace, among other things, the desperate attempts of a criminal to manufacture new and misleading evidence to turn aside the growing pursuit. In my case this evidence was actually manufactured by an accomplice of whose existence I was unaware.

Sheringham was caught napping there. He knew, cleverly enough, that Armored was listening on the second evening to our conversation in John's study; he never realized that she had been listening on the first evening too. She heard me then expressing my very real fears lest an adverse verdict should be returned against me at the inquest on the following day, and imploring Sheringham to unearth in the

short interval some evidence in my favour to prevent it. Whereupon she got up the next morning as soon as it was light and herself made those footprints at the twist in the path, acting on a suggestion which I had myself put to Sheringham more with the idea of opening his mind to the possibilities of the case than anything else. It may be imagined with what astonishment I heard that such footprints had actually been found.

During the night, too, the dear girl had made up her mind to the terrible decision, should things be going badly with me, to come to my rescue at the inquest with the story which she did, in fact, produce and which she calculated should put me out of danger for good and all. To support it she invented the incident of the wild rose and, when she went down to make the footprints, retrieved a wild rose which she remembered having plucked and thrown away a day or two earlier, and threw it on the ground near one of the bushes in the glade, treading it into the grass. That her story might transfer the suspicions of the police from me to herself she was fully aware, but in her own honest way considered it only fair that she should take that risk. Not even here, for the benefit of no eyes but my own, can I write down my opinion of such magnificent altruism. Such things cannot be expressed in words.

I think there is no more to explain.

If the reader of the foregoing manuscript knew the real truth he might be tempted to blame me (and in my own opinion justly) for allowing Sheringham to carry away the conviction that it was Elsa Verity who fired the shot that killed her lover. And indeed this did go seriously against my own conscience.

I kept silence at the time, in view of Armored's silent warnings; but alone in our room later I argued with her at length upon the gross unfairness to Miss Verity herself of such a proceeding. Armored, however, was quite

unconvinced. She pointed out that Sheringham would certainly keep his view to himself, that so long as he did so, Elsa could not be in the least injured by it, and that to try to disabuse him of it would be dangerous, and insanely and unnecessarily dangerous. I knew these arguments were nothing but sophistry, but in the end I consented. I had only been married a bare twenty-four hours, but already I had discovered that there are occasions on which a husband is wise to subordinate his convictions to his wife's sophistries.

Women have the advantage of one so. They refuse to argue; they persuade. And they seem particularly designed by nature for successful persuasion.

Yet who would remain a bachelor? Not I, for one. But there again one must not blame blindly. Others' cases are different from one's own. For instance, nobody else could hope to marry such a wife as the lady whom in this narrative I have called Armored.

A ROGER SHERINGHAM MYSTERY

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